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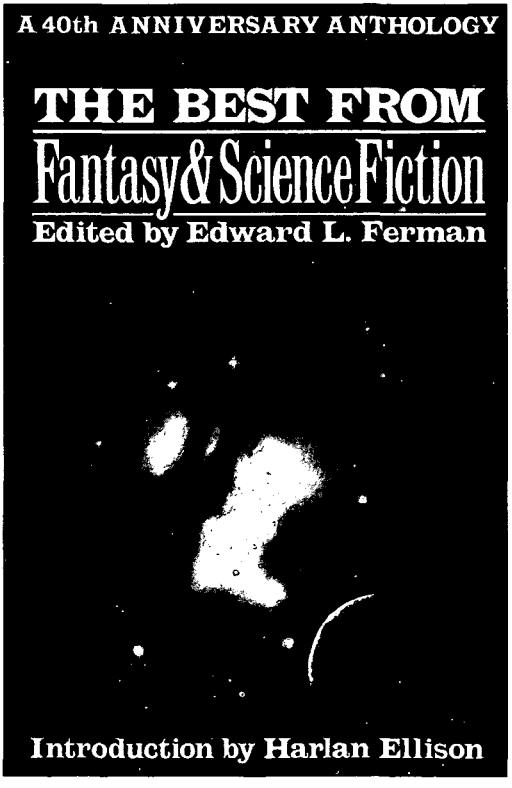

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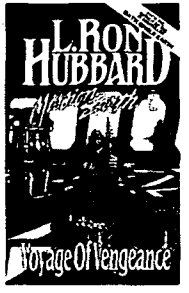

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy&ScienceFiction

Including VENTURE SCIENCE FICTION

MARCH • 41st Year of Publication

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Nancy Etchemendy's new story is science fiction about a lightbucker whose oath is: "Freely I give myself to the stars" and who returns to an Earth as foreign as the farthest point of light.

Shore Leave Blacks

By Nancy Etchemendy

I STAND IN THE hatchway, watching the quartermaster hunt through boxes of shore leave blacks. There's a tingle in my spine, the irritating buzz that means the most recent hit of bliss is about to wear off. I remember that tomorrow is the last Sunday in August — the traditional day of the family reunion — and anxiety begins to nibble at my stomach again. In another minute or two, the aching exhaustion of a week's insomnia will return. All I can do is try to ignore it. How I wish I hadn't left my blissbox in my cabin.

"Take it easy, Moffat," the quartermaster says as he gives me the blacks. "Your kid'll be fine. You'll see."

My hands shake as I hold up the strange uniform. It's a matte black coverall with silver piping on the sleeves and collar. The idea is to set us apart in a crowd so people will recognize us as lightbuckers and not just ordinary crazies. It looks like plastic, but it feels too soft and slippery for that. It's all one piece. No zippers, no Velcro. I can't even find any meld-

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seams, the sleekest new style when we left. So this is what they're wearing in San Francisco now.

"Maybe I ought to just forget this, Lucky," I say. "Maybe I should just. . . ." In the middle of the sentence, I have to clamp my jaw shut to keep my teeth from chattering.

The quartermaster's smile fades till there's only a little of it left. "Maybe you should just do what? Back out and spend your leave on the orbital station?" He shakes his head, but his voice softens. "I hear you signed on for the next Vega run. That's another fifty years, Annie. Think about it. You're never gonna get a second chance to see him."

Lucky's been a lightbucker for 2½ years — six months or a lifetime longer than I, depending on how you look at it. He knows what he's talking about. If I'm ever going to make peace with myself, I must do it now, before my son dies of old age. I squeeze my eyes shut. When I open them again, purple stars float across the shiny alloy of the ship's bulkheads.

Lucky touches my shoulder with a cool, firm hand. "Don't worry so much. You'll be O.K.," he says.

I can't reply. I'm too tired, too afraid that if I speak, I'll lose my last shreds of composure. The urge for another hit of bliss has become a maddening itch in my brain.

I nod and try to smile. After a moment I wad up the blacks, tuck them under my arm and start down the passageway toward my cabin.

Behind me, Lucky calls, "Atta girl."

Lightbuckers always stick together.

Alone in the crew cubicle, I scrabble in my footlocker till I find my blissbox — a lovely thing, intricately inlaid with Eridani gems. I remember the first moment I saw it, in the hands of a bucker named Forrest, in a desert town called Pactolus, a time and place at once beloved and lost. Beside the box lies a snapshot, cracked and dog-eared with handling: the blue sky, the sagebrush plain, the adobe ranch house at the base of the mountains where I grew up.

In the foreground stands a middle-aged woman, smiling, her tan face just beginning to show the effects of a life in the desert sun. Ah, Eugenia Miller, it's easy to image you as my mother, perhaps because I knew you better than my real one, who died when I was a child. It's hard to think of

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you as what you were — the lower-grade teacher in the two-room school where I learned to read.

In the picture, Eugenia holds my baby, Adam, swaddled in a faded patchwork quilt. The infant's face is hidden. All that shows is the top of his silky head. I cannot look at this picture without thinking of my father and my brother Tim, who haunt it like sullen ghosts. They refused to be in it. Angry because I joined the Light Corps, angry because I came home from my first mission pregnant, angry because I chose to go again and leave them to rear my child. Angrier still at Eugenia Miller because they believed she started it all.

Part of me insists it's only been a year since she posed for this snapshot; Adam must be taking his first few tottery steps by now. But another part of me knows that's a lie. For every minute of my life, almost an hour of theirs has gone by. My father is long since dead; Eugenia and Tim are old, or dead themselves. And Adam? For the barest instant, I wonder if, when he reached the age of thirty, he looked anything like Forrest.

I take a blissrock from the box, break it open, and inhale till it hurts.

I EMERGE FROM the gleaming orbital shuttle into a world so foreign that I have no idea whether it is better or worse than the one I left. The San Francisco Superterm is a squat, mazelike growth of gray cinder block. Like all such terminals, it stinks of petroleum, stale food, and human sweat. There the familiarity ends. Greenish lights flicker in the darker corners. There are rows of small windows. Through them I glimpse a surreal landscape of hills crowded with windmills, dilapidated shacks, needle-clean office towers, and everything in between.

The windmills have come a long way since I left. They bear little resemblance to the battered steel one that groaned in the dry breeze above my father's ranch. These are gigantic — ten or fifteen meters tall, with long parabolic blades and what must be supercool bearings. They turn though there seems to be no wind at all. I wipe sweat from my forehead. Clearly they don't produce enough electricity for luxuries like air-conditioning. I think of the cargo of nuclear fuels we have just brought back from Fomalhaut. The Light Corps was to have been the lifeline for this energy-hungry world. But looking at these bleak surroundings, I wonder how much difference we have really made.

In the briefing course, they told us all about ground-slicks, the friction-

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less magnetic trains that are now the most common form of transportation on Earth. But after fifteen minutes of trying to find a ground-slick schedule, I wonder if they made it all up. Outlandishly accoutred people buzz around me like bees — some hurrying past on clear-cut, if mysterious, errands; others milling in general confusion. Nobody pays the slightest attention to my inquiries. Maybe I'm being too polite.

Finally I grab the sleeve of an efficient-looking middle-aged man as he rushes by. "Do you know where the ground-slick schedules are posted?" I ask.

He frowns, indicates a tiny keyboard on the back of his hand, and says, "Get yourself a wristnet," then hurries on.

I stand there blinking and feeling stupid for a moment. The briefers told us there had been changes in the language. Mostly vocabulary, they said, and they went over a list of new words. But "wristnet" was not among them. I tighten my grip on the handle of my small black duffel and continued wandering. The briefers also told us the easiest way to deal with time dislocation is to think of Earth as just another alien planet. At the time I laughed aloud. Now I wish I could take their advice. My powers of self-deception are notoriously good, but even in this stinking terminal, I have a terrible case of déjà vu, and I can't make myself believe the lie. Earth is not just another alien planet. It's my home. And the people at the end of my journey are not just simple strangers. Once upon a time, they trusted me, and I deserted them.

I sneak into a corner and break open another blissrock, glancing over my shoulder to make sure no one is watching. The briefers were careful to warn us about the various penalties for consumption of illegal substances earthside. No one approves of blissbreathing; yet everyone does it. Especially lightbuckers.

Eventually I spy a set of small, deserted CRT screens with a list of ground-slick departures flashing across them in chartreuse letters. The next southbound slick leaves in an hour.

I find a bench and rest on the edge of it for a minute or two, rubbing my thumb across the inlays of the Eridani blissbox in my hip pocket. I take out the photograph and hold it in my hands like a talisman. I study Eugenia's face. If Adam is still alive, he probably left the ranch long ago. Perhaps the adobe house has fallen to dust. Perhaps there is no one left who cares what I've done, or who remembers that we used to have family

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reunions on the last Sunday of each August. The thought at once encourages and saddens me.

With a shiver, I get up to look for a ticket window. It takes less time to find than the schedule did. While I wait in line, a teenage girl with a small blue trapezoid painted on her forehead watches me curiously. At first I wonder why. Then I remember the shore leave blacks.

After a while she says, "Lightbucker, huh? How old are you?"

"Twenty-five," I say.

"No. I mean in real actualness," she says. She sticks something long and purple into her mouth and chews it loudly. It smells like garlic and artificial fruit.

"I'm really twenty-five." I stifle an urge to pull the smelly thing out of her mouth and throw it on the floor. The briefers tried to prepare us for as many changes in customs and styles as they could. But I can already see it was an impossible task.

"No. I mean, what is the truest longness of time since you were born?" she says, smacking her lips.

I wrap my fingers around the blissbox in my pocket. I should be a good sport, laugh and tell her exactly what she wants to hear — that I was born eighty years ago, when people still hoped the Light Corps might turn things around for Earth, a long time before blue forehead trapezoids and purple garlic confections came into vogue. But I can't seem to manage it.

"Twenty-five years," I repeat with a broad, stiff grin, and turn to the ticket agent.

I hand him my bioprotein card — a small, flat piece of transparent material that contains every bit of information known about me, or so the briefer said. The agent slips it into a slot in the counter, and when it pops out again, he hands it back to me.

"Where's my ticket?" I say.

"You're holding it," he replies. "Next." And he beckons to the girl with the blue trapezoid.

"Uh . . . wait a minute. Where can I buy a newspaper?" It slips out before I remember how foolish it will sound.

He steps back and squints at me. I watch his face change as my blacks register. "Peeeeesuz!" he says; it's almost a whistle. "Maddleford, come here. Alwaysful wanting to see a lightbucker. . . ."

Maddleford is a man in his forties whose hair stands up like the fur

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on an angry dog's back. He has on a jacket that looks like it's made of gold spiderwebs.

"Newspaper?" says the ticket agent. He is practically screaming with laughter.

"See this?" says Maddleford, pointing to my card. "Take your biopro to an infodist and have it codified in the news slot. Then all you need to do is beam it on your reader."

I stand there for a moment before I realize my mouth is hanging open.

"I'm next, light*fucker*," says the girl with the blue trapezoid. She joins the ticket agent, who is laughing even louder now.

"Shuddup," says Maddleford.

I grab my duffel bag and walk across the depot, holding my chin as high as I can, wishing I could do something about my cheeks, which burn, and my hands, which shake as if I were truly ancient. Before long I am running as fast as I can down the corridor toward the southbound ground-slick gate.

I pause only a moment on the platform, to wipe sweat from my eyes and try to regain my composure. Then I duck through one of the slick's dented aluminum doors and find a seat beside a grimy window. I close my eyes, trying to appear cool and detached. I want to be the tough light-bucker on leave from the stars. I want to be the lean figure on the Saturday vidflicks Tim and I used to watch. But in the darkness behind my eyelids, Adam appears. My son, twenty-two years older than I am, abandoned by a mother who wandered off in search of more compelling loves. I lurch forward in my seat, breathing fast, staring at nothing.

From the row in front of mine, a little boy gazes at me with his mouth open. He is clutching a stuffed replica of a Centauran silk-spinner.

"Look, Mommy. A lightbucker!" His eyes are big, his voice shrill.

In a sudden fit of shyness, he ducks. Peering at me from between the seat backs, he waves the stuffed spinner over his head. "Sssst ssssst," he says. "I bet you've never seen one of these."

I smile, thinking of Adam. Was he ever like this? "Oh, yes, I've seen one of those," I say. "On Alpha Two. The real ones have bigger thoraxes, and they smell like a combination of skunks and rotten eggs."

"Really?" His wide-eyed face reappears above the seats, but only for a moment. I hear the sharp slap of flesh on flesh. "Ow!" he cries.

Then a woman, probably his mother, whispers, "Stop that. It's whippy.

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Lightbuckers are all brainbent. I don't want you talking to her again."

I am left gazing at the empty seat backs, bitterness rising in the back of my throat. Brainbent. *Freely I give myself to the stars.* That is the oath of the lightbucker. *Freely I afflict myself with the stigmata of temporal physics. Freely I lay down my humanness in return for the beauty of space.* Don't make me laugh.

I run my fingers over the hip pocket of my blacks, and the blissbox riding snugly there. I remember my first whiff of bliss, lying in Forrest's arms, looking up at the desert stars of my home as if I had never seen them before. "I am infinitely strong," I thought. And all the anger I felt at my circumstances — the death of my mother, the thankless toil of holding a job, keeping house for Father and Tim, and helping with the ranch — was replaced with soft melancholy. "I understand," I thought. "Finally I understand."

Illusory or not, it's a difficult state of mind to resist. I slip the box from my pocket, break open a rock, and inhale its contents.

Almost immediately I hear polite words from the aisle. "Sorry to bother you, but. . . ."

The voice belongs to an immaculate attendant whose clothing, I suspect, is the same color the ground-slick's seat upholstery was before it wore out. He's younger than I am, barely out of his teens, but he places his hand on my shoulder like a favorite uncle giving wise advice. "Buckerfriend, blissbreathing is antilawful here. Didn't they tell you?"

I regard him for a moment, hoping I will discover something useful about him from his face, his hands, the way he carries himself. I wonder what he will do to me. "Sorry. I didn't know. I won't use any more of them." The lie slips out smoothly.

He smiles in a cordial, practiced way. "Thanks, buckerfriend. But same in same, I have to take them away."

All I can think of is the prospect of facing Adam without the help of bliss. I have a few extra rocks hidden in my duffel, but I'm not sure they'll be enough to get me through. A tingle of panic buzzes upward from my groin. I feel the muscles in my neck tighten. "What do you mean? They're mine."

"It's antilawful to possess them. Sorry," he says.

"Look. Just let me keep them. I'm not bothering anyone."

He turns and beckons to someone I can't see. A larger attendant hurries down the aisle.

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We can see the stars through the dust, and he points out the ones he has been to.

"Please don't," I say, in as quiet a voice as I can manage. They pay no attention. The new arrival pries my fingers open and takes away the Eridani blissbox. I watch him touch it, hating him, feeling as if he were violating my own body. The other passengers whisper behind their hands.

"The box isn't yours. At least let me keep the box," I say.

He opens it, shakes the blissrocks into the palm of his hand, and pockets them. Smirking, he tosses the box to the first attendant, turns and walks back the way he came. I pound the armrests softly with my palms, cursing the guilt that made me embark on this journey, wishing for the familiar comfort of unexplored planets.

But a second later, I feel the initial tendrils of euphoria wrap around me as that last, expensive hit of bliss finally begins to take effect.

I notice that the first attendant's cheeks are red. An apologetic smile jerks across his face and disappears as he hands the empty box back to me. I'm fascinated by his teeth, which are horribly white. Briefly, I hope I have ruined his day. Then the main rush of bliss floods through me, the ground-slick shudders out of the station, and I realize my anger is not worth the energy it takes to sustain it.

I close my eyes, enjoying the way a smile feels on my face. Of course everything will be fine. I picture myself scuffling through the dusty remains of the adobe ranch house. Nobody will be there. Least of all Adam. It hardly matters anyway.

I imagine the earth without people. It would all be so much easier then. Sky. Continents. Mountains. Rocks. Maybe these are the things I have really come back for. Entities that change at a meaningful rate — not at all in a hundred human life spans. But in fact, my mind is on people. Tim, my father, Adam, and especially Eugenia Miller, who was kind to me when no one else chose to be. I loved a lightbucker once. He said he would take me to the stars and grow old with me. I believed him. Exhausted, I doze.

I dream of Forrest.

On a warm, windy night, he comes to the café where I work. We can see the stars through the dust, and he points out the ones he has been to. Over coffee, he watches me with his flame-blue eyes, and tells me the story

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of his life. When I bring him his check, he lays the Eridani blissbox on the tray. I have never seen anything like it before. "Keep it," he says. "Let me take you somewhere. I have no one. No one in all the world except you." I imagined his home, a town in the north — the snow, the heavy gray sky, the streets filled with strangers. "Dead, or transformed by time, all of them," he says.

I hold the blissbox in the palm of my hand. It feels warm, as if it contains all the fire of the stars. The heat goes up my arm, down my spine in a shiver of longing, and I know nothing will ever be the same again.

I struggle to stay in the warmth of this moment, but the dream fades into an old familiar one. I am standing on the ramp of a Lux-drive starship waiting for Forrest. I have just returned from the leave I took to bear our son; this ship is bound for Fomalhaut, and Forrest and I have both signed on for the run. I was to meet him here.

Instead, it's a cosmocop who meets me. Sadness clings to him like dust. I see it in the soft lines of his face, even on his boots and dark uniform. He holds something out to me. A padded envelope bearing the official insignia of the Light Corps.

"I'm terribly sorry," he says. "The ensign was a good man. I knew him personally."

I stare down at the envelope, knowing what's in it. A stilted letter about a loading accident on an asteroid. For a moment I can't breathe. Then the dream disappears, and there's nothing left. Nothing left at all except blackness.

When I awaken, we have already come far south — stopping at small places along the way, no doubt — and are hurtling through the mountains. In a few minutes, we will reach Pactolus. I stare out the window, lost in a game of pretend. I'm sixteen years old. I'm riding in an automobile, and beside me sit Tim and my father. We're on our way home to the Lost Cannon Ranch. I know these meadows, these granite cliffs. They will look the same forever. The stars are only a dream. There is no Adam. And relativity is an esoteric mind-game played for amusement by certain academics.

The fantasy abruptly disintegrates as the little boy I spoke to earlier begins to wail for unknown reasons.

The question returns: What will I say to my son?

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* * *

The slick stops only a few seconds in Pactolus. I step onto the platform, the strap of my duffel bag twisted around my wrist so tightly it almost cuts off the circulation. There's a slight rush of cool air as the train pulls away. Then I am alone.

The Lost Cannon Ranch lies four miles from here, at the end of a dirt road. More precisely, if the Lost Cannon Ranch still exists, it lies four miles from here, and the road was dirt forty-seven years ago.

I walk toward the tiny station house. The sun pours down from a fierce blue sky, baking everything — the wood, the rocks, the sagebrush, and especially me, in my impractical black uniform. Somehow, I had forgotten the magnitude of this dry heat. I loosen my collar.

Inside the station there's an office with a counter and a window. A sign above it says "Tickets and Information." The person inside does not look up when I speak.

"I want to go out to the Lost Cannon. What's the best way to get there?" I say, then hold my breath.

"Go down to Naylor's and rent a sandscoot."

I start to breathe again, a little shakily. He recognizes the name. The ranch must still be there.

"What's a sandscoot?"

Now he raises his head, frowning. I'm relieved to discover that he is a mere baby, a boy in his early twenties, far too young to be anyone I know.

"Waddya mean, what's a sandscoot?" he says. His speech patterns seem more familiar, less modern, than those I heard in the Superterm. At least one thing remains unchanged. The mainstream of progress still takes a long time to touch a place as small as Pactolus.

I stand in fidgety silence while he looks at me. I would like nothing better than to abandon this exchange and find a secluded place to do a blissrock.

His expression goes from suspicion to excitement as he realizes I'm dressed in a bucker's uniform. "Peesuz, you must be Annie Moffat!"

"That's right," I say as he shakes my hand across the counter. "How did you know my name?"

"Old Tim said to stay sharp for lightbuckers, because you might show for the reunion this year. They keep track of the ships. You're famous around here — did you know that?" he says.

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"No." Old Tim. Still alive. In a single sentence, the boy behind the counter has blasted away the possibility that nothing will happen. There will be no dusty ruins. The family will gather. And the last Sunday of August looms in my future as surely as tomorrow's sunrise. I struggle to control the panic that rises inside me. I don't want to be famous. I don't want Tim to be keeping track of the ships. I wish everyone had forgotten about me.

The counterboy continues with horrible good cheer. "My name's Jerry Blue. Pleased to meet you." He flashes me a big, easy grin. "My father says you went to school with him."

Blue. I think I remember this alleged father. A kid with big ears who had a black dog named Sandy. The storm of panic abates a little, and with it the itch for a blissrock. I return the boy's smile in spite of myself. I take a deep breath.

"Tell me. What's a sandscoot?" I say.

"Well, it's . . . peesuz, haven't you ever seen a sandscoot?"

I shake my head again and lick salty sweat from my upper lip.

"Naw, now that I think of it. Sandscoots have only been around since '70. Peesuz. You've been gone a long time."

Oh no, I want to say. You just *think* I've been gone a long time. You're crazy. It's only been a year.

"Sandscoot," says Jerry Blue. "It's a single-passenger wheel for rough-terrain hopping." He wrinkles his forehead. "I just thought of something, though. You got a VO permit?"

"I don't know. Maybe," I say. I hand him my biopro.

"Two secs realtime. I'll find out." He slides the card into the omnipresent slot in the counter and drums his fingers while he waits for information to appear on a CRT screen. "Sorry," he says. "I'm saving up for a wristnet, but I don't have it yet." He taps the back of his hand like the man in the Superterm who also talked of wristnets.

My puzzlement must show, for he adds, as the CRT begins to glow with text, "You know about wristnets? It's kind of . . . peesuz . . .hard to explain. Like having a computer link straight to your brain. It's faster."

I try, without much success, to imagine what it would be like to have a computer link straight to my brain.

Jerry Blue glances at the screen, hands the card back to me. "No vehicle operator's permit. I didn't think so. Naylor can't rent you a sandscoot without one."

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A new obstacle. From the beginning, this journey has been like trying to map a type-four planet. Maybe all these problems are fate's way of telling me I shouldn't be doing this. God, I need a blissrock. I fight the impulse to fling myself through the doorway and run northward along the ground-slick tracks until this place is invisible, not even a smudge on the horizon. I know it won't work. Wherever I go, I carry Pactolus and the Lost Cannon and all their inhabitants inside me. The only way to escape is to face them.

Jerry Blue leans an elbow on the counter and scratches his head. "Say. Do you know how to ride a horse?"

Here at last is something I can understand. We look at each other, and both of us smile at the same time.

HE LOCKS up the station, and we walk down the main street of town. It's been paved since I saw it last, though the asphalt is full of potholes how. Two gigantic windmills rise in the distance like trees transplanted from some alien ecosystem. But the air smells familiar. Sagebrush and dust.

We pass the post office with its flagpole, and the patch of lawn where I turned my first somersault. There is the Pactolus Mercantile. Someone painted it pink — about ten years ago, judging from its condition. But the entrance stands open, and I recognize the old ceiling fan that stirs the air in the dark interior of the store. There is the Majestic Theater, boarded up now. And the school. And Joe and Lila's, where I waited tables and met a bucker named Forrest. It has a new name. *Porky's Café*. They've replaced the old leather booths with plastic tables and chairs. The sight leaves me suddenly empty.

I fidget with the meldseams of my duffel. I could reach into it as we walk. Refill the Eridani blissbox with rocks. Nobody in this hick town would even know what I was doing.

"We'll ask Eugenia Miller if you can use one of her horses," says Jerry Blue. "Maybe you know her. She used to teach school."

The name jolts me out of my daydreams. "Who did you say?"

"Eugenia Miller."

We have stopped at the south end of the street. To our right stands a white Victorian, the first building I have seen since my arrival that looks as if someone cares about it. Behind the house stretches a fenced field,

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kept green by a tiny irrigation ditch. Two horses graze at its banks, snorting and stamping in the heat. I know this place. Its owner taught me many things — among them that the world extends beyond Pactolus.

Eugenia was young then, a schoolmarm widow who lived in this wooden house with her small daughter, Rose. I envied the child. Rosie had no father to torment her for lacking the strength of a son, no older brother to live up to. And she had what I would have given in exchange for life itself: a mother.

I slip my hand into my pocket and run my fingertips across the cracked finish of the photograph, now moist with sweat, the picture of Eugenia holding my son. "Annie," she used to say, "you're bright. With a little work, that brain of yours will take you wherever you want to go."

A torrent of memories pours down on me like desert rain. How I kicked Billy Harper in the shins so I could stay after school to clean blackboards. How I lingered afternoons at this whitewashed gate till Eugenia, with a smile and a sigh, appeared on the porch and beckoned me in for milk and cookies. How she single-handedly persuaded my stubborn father to let me go away to college. And how, years later, she rocked my baby in her arms and said, "It's no crime to love more than one thing. Follow your heart, my dear."

I hear the rush of my own blood as a small, wrinkled woman in jeans and boots answers Jerry Blue's knock. How old would she be? I figure a sum in my head. Eighty-seven. Eighty-eight. "How are you, Jerald? What brings you out today?" she says, brushing a wayward lock of white hair from her eyes. Perhaps he was once a student of hers. I do another mental sum. No. He's far too young.

"Somebody special needs a horse, Eugenia, and I thought you might be willing to lend one of yours," says Jerry Blue. He gestures at me, standing behind him in the cool shade of the porch. "It's one of these lightbucker Moffats, here for the big reunion. Old Tim's sister."

Something about the wording of that statement seems odd, but I have no more than a second or two to wonder about it before the thought is lost to more important ones. For Eugenia is peering at me, her green eyes as bright and intense as marbles set in the unfamiliar wrinkles of her flesh.

"My God, Annie," she murmurs. "They said you'd live forever, and it must be true. You don't look a day older. Not one day." The bright eyes fill

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with tears. She rises on tiptoes to enfold me in her arms. At last I can cry, too.

The horse is Eugenia's favorite, a glossy black gelding called Night Sky. With strength belying her age, she throws a black Spanish saddle tooled with silver over his back. I protest. "It's too valuable! It might be stolen."

She laughs. "In Pactolus? Come to your senses, girl. Climb up there, and not another word about it. The saddle doesn't get used half as often as it should since Rosie left home. Why, you in your black outfit, and Night Sky in his, all decked with silver, the two of you look like you rode right down from the stars." She winks at me. "Besides. A grand entrance is always good for the soul."

I smile, mount, lean over the stirrup to kiss her, wondering how much she knows about what's waiting for me. The panic swirls up again, and I have to spend a long moment, eyes closed, steadying myself.

Eugenia reaches up and squeezes my hand. "If it's any comfort to you," she says, "every woman's child grows up to be a stranger." She shakes her head and looks away across the desert. "I guess almost anything can make a mother feel guilty."

She looks back at me with a quick smile, then slaps the horse on the rump and cries, "Giddyup! They're waiting for you."

Night Sky is a good horse — spirited but responsive. Black, I think, as he takes me over the road. Black for space. Black for the bucker. Black for the absence of light. Four miles isn't far for such a fine animal. I don't urge him. Instead, I let him set his own pace, except for the moments when my courage fails me. Then I pull gently on the reins and hold him prancing among the sagebrush and junipers. Three times I stop and reach for my duffel bag. Twice I leave it unopened. The third time I hold a blissrock in my shaking hand and stare at it, finally returning it unbroken to the bag. *No more,* I think. *For this, I must be myself.*

Long before we reach the ranch, the sun fattens, almost touching the hills. The horse's hooves stir the dust of the desert, make it shimmer in the oblique rays of evening. I make him dance in circles while I try to steel myself yet again for what lies ahead. We move on awhile. Then I stop him again, and we move on again. In this way we come at last to the gate of the Lost Cannon.

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The house is still there, already lying deep in the shadow of the mountains. One of the tall poplar trees has disappeared. The windmill has been replaced with a newer model. The porch sags a little. Figures move in its dim shelter. In the still, dry air, crickets have begun to sing. Quiet voices carry from the porch, a sound so vividly familiar that for a moment it makes me dizzy. On this, the night before the last Sunday of August, the gathering has already begun.

Night Sky whickers as someone approaches through the blue twilight, holding up an electric lantern. "Hello. Who's there?" It's a man's voice.

"Annie. Annie the lightbucker." This is the moment. The moment when I push away from the hull of the ship, trusting my life to a frail rope of human manufacture.

I dismount from the horse, patting his neck, willing myself to hold the reins loosely as if I were calm and relaxed. The man's pace quickens. He stops a few yards from me. The dusk is so deep that I still can't make out his face. In my pocket, my hand is a fist around Forrest's empty Eridani blissbox.

"Annie. Your name is Annie?" says the voice in the darkness.

"Yes," I say. "The one who's been away a long time. The one who. . . ."

"I know," he says. "They say you left your child behind because you loved space and lightbuckers more. My mother. You're my mother."

The breath rushes out of me. For a moment I can make no sound at all. Then: "I . . . Adam, I . . . *I'm so sorry.*" I don't even know if my words are intelligible. I seem dissolved in tears. I hear them, pat, pat, falling into the dust at my feet. I want to stop, but it's useless. The pain is too great. I scrub my sleeve across my eyes, trying to replace the pain with disgust at my own behavior. Anything is better.

Adam draws nearer. I can almost smell him — a clean, moist scent like the vigorous breath of a child. In a moment I see him more clearly through the gloom, and a second shock hits me.

How old must he be? Forty-seven, forty-seven; I have long since memorized it. But I can see him well enough to be certain of one thing. This Adam is young. Twenty-two. Twenty-three. Even younger than I am.

"It's all right. I'm glad you came. Mother." The last word comes slowly, as if he's trying it out, listening to the sound of it. I hear the scrape of his boots as he scuffs them against the ground. "I wanted to tell you that I understand. I do. I understand."

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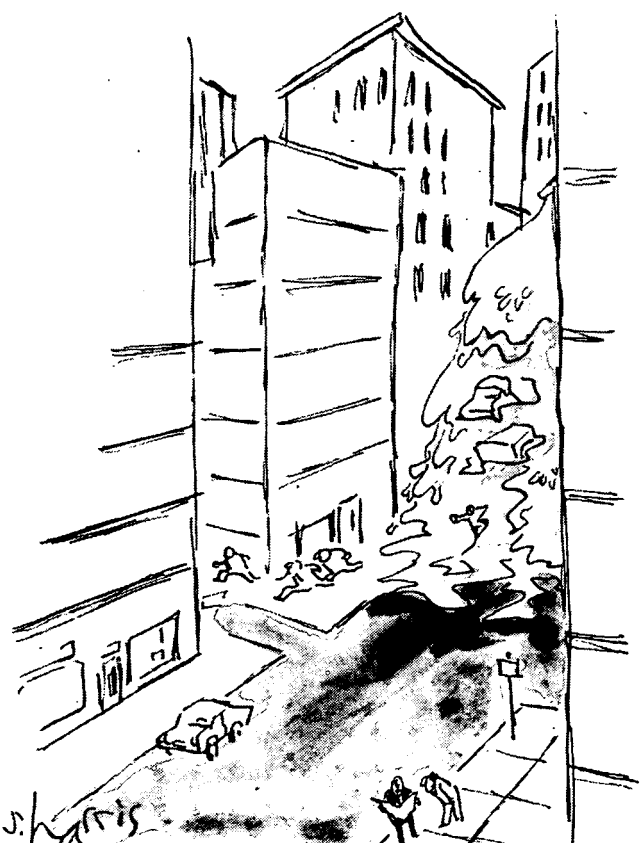
He holds the lantern higher, and for the first time since his infancy, I see him in completeness. I step toward him, the ache inside me fluttering now, like a bird considering flight. His suit looks like plastic, but it's too soft. It's all one piece, and it has no zippers, no Velcro, not even any meldseams. He is wearing shore leave blacks.

His laughter is bright and pure as the light of suns. Oh yes, he understands, and I laugh along with him, relishing the sound of it. He links his arm through mine.

Above us the first stars appear.



"I see they predict melting of the polar ice cap. I wonder how that will affect us."

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

The World Beyond the Hill, Alexei and Cory Panshin; Jeremy P. Tarcher, $50.00 (An Elephant Book)

ALEXEI AND Cory Panshin seem to have forgotten what they do best, which is the creation of award-winning and almost award-winning fiction. Which is a shame, but who am I to talk? What they have turned to, instead, is the book probing some aspect of science fiction, the thing, and beyond doubt *The World Beyond the Hill* is the most ambitious effort to date. Is it "The best, the *best,* history of science fiction I have ever read" as Isaac Asimov says on the back cover? Yes. Is it good enough? Well, that's what this column's about.

Alexei (we will forget about Cory, for the moment) Panshin has a checkered history in this field. *Heinlein in Dimension,* in typical particular, time after time tripped over its own feet in getting *almost* to the heart of the matter. And that, friends, meant that it was the most pernicious type of book of its kind — it had all its facts right, and it was wrong in its conclusions. Is this (remembering Cory again) true of *The World Beyond the Hill?* Well, yes and no. (There are few easy answers. I am, however, grateful for the one undeniable fact — it is, clearly, the best book of its kind.)

Its thesis is deceptively simple: With the rise of the Industrial Revolution, mankind in the Western world had to give up its myths, leave the Village, and take up new myths which had at their heart the transcendance of science . . . The World Beyond the Hill. Well, any fool knows that. The question is in what *way* this is true, and Alexei and Cory patiently and in many, many words, go after this elusive target.

I want to say, once, that they take too many words, and not all of them are as elegant and as mellifluous as they apparently believe. The book is 685 pages long, counting everything, and that's too many, especially considering that the book is in closely set type. But what would have been the ideal length?

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Perhaps 500 pages? Perhaps 684? All I really know is that the book is too long: that does not keep it from being valuable. And with that said, I won't repeat it.

They start approximately with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, 1764, and work their way up, patiently, to Isaac Asimov's "The Mule." (The bulk of the book takes up the Golden Age.) I searched the index, in vain, for any mention of Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), who surely prefigured not only Walpole but, far more importantly, Mary Woolstonecraft Shelley.

Now, let me expound on that for a moment. *The Castle of Otranto* may or may not be interesting — I've never read it, and in that I am not alone. The Panshins give an interesting synopsis of it, though not interesting enough to cause me to read it. I will be damned, however, if anything in that synopsis or the discussion of the book leads me to find anything of signficance in it, despite its auctorial disclaimers (on Walpole's part) of authorship until the second edition. What does strike me is the numerous parallels between the seemingly naturalistic *Robinson Crusoe* — done by Defoe much earlier than *Otranto* — and the undoubtedly science fictional *Frankenstein* by Shelley in 1818.

This may strike you as largely a distinction without a difference. But it is an early bird, and it is compounded by the Panshins by their pointing to *Otranto* time and again as being paralleled by Shelley — I will be damned if I can see it, at least from their examples — when, for instance, Crusoe's incessant "Why me, Oh Lord! Why didst Thou choose me?" is exactly echoed by the monster in *Frankenstein* except that he calls upon Viktor Frankenstein instead of the Lord.

And it does nothing for the narrative drive of the Panshin's book to have no reference at all to the curious parallels between Defoe's *A Journal of The Plague Year*, which is a genuine proto-SF book, no question about it, and Shelley's *The Last Man*, which is unabashedly SF.

They do a little better by Verne. He is described as the last of the Romantics — with which I beg to differ, considering that the Romantic is warp and woof of science fiction to this day — but he is accurately-enough described as a half-convinced journeyer into the World Beyond the Hill, drawing back at the last instance. I personally consider that he drew back at almost the beginning, and I personally consider Verne the forerunner of the Martin Caidin type of writer, rather than in the main stream of SF. But that may very well be a very small crochet, and in any case is not too far from what the Panshins say about him.

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Once again, though, I search the Index in vain . . . for a listing of Rudyard Kipling, in this case. I may be wrong about this, but it seems to me that the author of "As Easy as ABC" needs to be considered. (If not for his other works of science fiction, which strike me as minor once you get beyond "With the Night Mail.") No one knows what led Kipling into and out of SF almost in a breath — almost — but "As Easy as ABC" is a marvelous piece of work, prefiguring the second half of the 20th century almost exactly, and "With the Night Mail" is not far behind. In fact, in equipping his aeronauts with reliable dirigible balloons he may have been false to exact fact, but there is little doubt in my mind that Kipling influenced Wells in the matter of who and how the world would be ruled. (And that they were *both* wrong is not important, though it may be indicative.)

But we do get to Wells, if a little more directly than seems quite fair.

By and by, in a few pages, we come across a curious thing — an inexact parallel to Mary Shelley. "What a change from the Romantic hysteria of Viktor Frankenstein!" Oh, really? Is it to be supposed that the story is about Viktor Frankenstein? I thought it was about the Monster, but perhaps I am mistaken. The title of the novel is after all *Frankenstein*, so undoubtedly I am. Well, never mind. (Except that, a few pages later, the Panshins talk as if *Frankenstein* were the only SF story Mary ever wrote.)

As I was saying, we do get to Wells. Again, I have serious quarrels with the Panshins interpretation of him. I would, for instance, have dearly loved to see them dealing with *The Invisible Man*, which strikes me as undoubtedly a fable, on one level. (There is little doubt in my mind that Griffin is not killed by shovels by accident; rather, that this is a clear indication Wells meant his story to be understood as the triumph of proletarian man in the mass over the lone entrepreneur.) But serious quarrels over interpretations of one instance or another are beside the point here; I think they are right when they say that Wells was the first true explorer of The World Beyond the Hill, and that agreement takes precedence.

Of course, it goes on to say that Wells the Edwardian was in some sense different from Wells the Victorian — that in 1905, when Queen Victoria at last died, Wells in a sense died, too. If you were wondering, I am in complete agreement. Again, we may take it as practically given that I have some reservations; again, we may take it that they are on the order below that which mat-

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ters. Wells was not the same after Queen Victoria's death, and whether the two events are more than time-coincident — or that this is the Panshins message, which it isn't — is beside the point.

Burroughs and Merritt come next in the Panshins chronology — we are getting close, at last, to the nub of this book — and I don't see the relevance of Merritt to the central Panshin thesis, but perhaps I missed something. Merritt seems to have repeated some conceptual steps, but he seems merely to have repeated them, and to be in this book as a matter of courtesy. He ought to have a book of his own —as, indeed, he does, in Sam Moskowitz's *Reflections In The Moon Pool* — but he fails to convince us of the need to be in this one except as a minor character . . . especially, to be a precursor of Jack Williamson, not to put too fine a point on it. But perhaps I am getting ahead of myself.

Who does deserve a fullscale biography, and as far as I know has never gotten one that sticks in the mind, is Edgar Rice Burroughs. But even more flagrantly — and in this case the fault is clearly the Panshins — is the near omission of William Fitzgerald Jenkins, ("Murray Leinster"), who deserves quite a bit more than he got from the authors of *The World Beyond the Hill.**

But that's as may be. We come to Doc Smith, and again I have my quarrels with the Panshins, and, again, they don't amount to much on the level that counts, which is the central thrust of this book. Whether there was as much to Smith as the Panshins make out — or whether there was more — they have given him essentially a fair shake as a seminal pioneer of superscience in my eyes.

Somewhere in here, Hugo Gernsback pops up at last. He has appeared very early in this book, and one more time after that, and now at last he is given the full treatment.

**He appears here in about three places, all toward the end of the book. One of the places is in his remote connection with the publication of "Deadline," a story by Cleve Cartmill. This story, in which Cartmill supposedly in all innocence gave away the secret of the Atomic Bomb, was obviously pretty much a deliberate ploy by Campbell. John couldn't stand not knowing whether the Allies were working on the bomb, he primed Cartmill to write a completely uncharacteristic story in which a kind of bomb appeared, and furthermore it contains at least one story device which Campbell would never have accepted if the story were not a deadfall. I know that is not the way this episode is presented, usually. Oh, by the way, Jenkins was interviewed by the FBI on this occasion, and that is the reason why he is in this footnote.*

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Gernsback seems to have been a man who it was not possible to be neutral about. We will not go into that, beyond saying that whatever he was, he did name science fiction, (except for a minor poet in the middle of the nineteenth century), he did start *Amazing Stories* in 1926, and from that much happened, most particularly John W. Campbell, Jr. Well, let me put it this way — he was a rascal, but then practically all the actors in publishing at our level were rascals. It's a matter of degree, not of kind.

John W. Campbell, Jr., was a one-of-a-kind. I can see many — but not all, of course — of the principal actors in this drama being replaced by other of their ilk. But without John W. Campbell, Jr., we have nothing . . . or, rather, we have something else entirely.

John was not a bearlike man; he gave that illusion. Rather, he was a fox, and like all foxes was as prone to versions of him as there are observers. So I cannot quarrel with any given interpretation of him, and, besides, I am not at all sure of my own. Suffice it to say that he gave us what we are, and how exactly he did it is not the issue. But there are some peculiarities in the Panshins presentation of him, from my point of view.

No one can quarrel with the fact that John did it. But what he did *is* at issue, because of the peculiar stance this book takes. And what he did may not be knowable for quite some time in the future. But here's my stab at it:

Some time in the 1930s, John W. Campbell, Jr. decided to stop writing and get to editing. He had held a bewildering variety of dead end jobs, including some time working in the labs of either Mack Truck or White Truck, depending on whether one believes the Panshins (Mack) or Budrys (White, but I am willing to change). He got a job in 1937 at Street & Smith, which meant *Astounding*, and though he was not the editor — he was the assistant, at first — he rapidly began making plans.

A thing that has never been satisfactorily resolved is what he would have done if F. Orlin Tremaine had stayed on as editor . . . which he was apparently going to do for some time. Being on the payroll as an assistant was better than nothing, but it hardly seems like the opportunity it (unexpectedly?) became when Tremaine moved up precipitously, first as a rarified figure of semidetached authority who left John to become the full editor of *Astounding* in 1938, and then out.

Shortly thereafter, John's bosses came to him and presented him with the thing a new editor loves

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just about least of all — two writers who did not fit into his plans at all, but to whom he had to accommodate. One was Arthur J. Burks, who Campbell knew slightly, and who would in effect do nothing of significance for the magazine . . . in part because he would join the Marine Corps and go off to war shortly. The other was L. Ron Hubbard, a total stranger to science fiction, who promptly fell in love with the field, and, by all accounts, with whom John had a long and varied relationship despite the fact that he, too, was to go off to war within a matter of 30 months.

Now, I wish, very much, that the Panshins has asked me; I could have told them that the book on which they base all their researches into this aspect of Campbell was full of untruths and half-truths, plausible though it may sound. And I could have proved it to them. (The book in question is by Russell Miller; it contains serious errors of fact, which can be checked by making a few phonecalls not to me, but to the Naval Bureau of Personnel and like.)

But be that as it may, the fact is that L. Ron Hubbard played a much larger part in the development of *Astounding* (and *Unknown*) than he is generally given credit for, now that the past is receding swiftly into legend. While events were fresher in the minds of fans, there was no doubt that Campbell's Big Three were Heinlein, Hubbard, and van Vogt.

Frankly, what mattered to me were the issues, one every month, of *Astounding Science Fiction*. I would have happily consumed an issue a week, or a day, or twice a day. But that's neither here nor there — what mattered to the science fiction readers was that someting new was being born before their very eyes, and it was Oh so good. And the army, or seeming army, of contributors, very few of whom were selling to the other magazines.

As the war grew onward, from time to time Campbell would mutter darkly about the absence of some name or the other, or would chortle happily about the presence of some new name. Frankly, I think too much has been made of this; if you were there, as I was, it was understood that the absent names would be back — and, astonishingly, they all were — and meanwhile the fill-ins were at least as good as all but the very best.

That is the part that seems to have escaped all the historians . . . to the rank and file reader, *Astounding* continued to grow. If it might have grown in some other way, the fact is that it continued to grow, to grow rapidly, and if in some parallel

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world it might have been better, it would also have been different. And no one will ever know if different meant better.

The war may very well have been the salvation of *Astounding*. And of *Unknown*, because, although the war killed it formally, it was never a success. And after the war, when *Unknown* tried to relaunch itself — though this is problematic, because it tried to relaunch itself as a reprint — it failed miserably. Perhaps — I say this with some trepidation — it was better off remaining a shining name than it was in actuality.

No one will ever know. But one thing seems clear to me; the *Astounding* that I knew continued to flourish as if "The Mule" were just an incident. If The World Beyond the Hill depends on *Astounding*'s dying (so to speak) with the publication of that distinguished but not otherwise remarkable story, then something is wrong with the Panshins theory. The fact is that *Astounding* did not go into decline until some years after that, and did not fall into the pack of also-rans for some years after *that*.

But *if* there is something wrong with the Panshins theory. Because the bottom line is that though I don't believe in more than half of the Panshins evidence, which I think is at least flawed in one crucial way or another throughout the book, I believe in the Panshins book. In the end, it doesn't matter if Horace Walpole or Daniel Defoe did it to Shelley, or if Gernsback was quite as bad as all that, or any of it. What counts is that John W. Campbell, Jr. moved science fiction forever into The World Beyond the Hill.

How he did it, exactly, I think will have to be left to another book . . . which may never be written, because this is a gigantic labor, and because it has been done, now, for all that is as curious a book as you would want. And because time marches on; there are other fish to fry, now.

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Thomas Easton is a biologist and book reviewer for Analog. *In recent years he has been working on a series of stories about an "organic future", in which genetic engineers accomplish such things as dog-like vehicles. . .*

Down on the Truck Farm

By Thomas A. Easton

THE HOUSE WAS a Swiss chalet with a cantilevered deck. It looked like it would be quite at home on a mountainside, overhung by beetling cliffs, overlooking some deep valley through which ran a far-off thread of silver. Jimmy Brane could close his eyes and imagine the thin whistle of mountain wind, the echoing yodels of distant shepherds, the bleating of sheep and goats in some meadow just around the bulge of the alp. He didn't have to imagine the smell of honeysuckle.

He knew he should laugh at himself, but he just didn't have the energy. The house was supported not by a mountain, but by a massive gengineered beanstalk, stiffened by a single concrete pillar. The deck was overhung by bean leaves the size of tabletops, and it overlooked only the yard next door.

It was no coincidence that Jimmy was leaning on the deck's railings and staring at that yard now. That was where his best friend, Tommy, had lived. Now Tommy's mother lay stretched out on a towel, dark-haired and

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nearly bare, sunbathing, sipping again and again, as she did all day, every day, at. . . . Until very recently, she had always been puttering about her pumpkin house, touching up the sealants that had been sprayed onto the dried shell, washing windows, pruning the vine that still provided shade. But she had once fooled around with the chalet's previous owner, and Tommy had found out. He had, in fact, learned that the man he had always called his father bore to him no blood relationship at all. That was when he had run away.

Tommy hadn't even waited to graduate from high school. He had cut and run, leaving Jimmy to peer over the railing at the ground below and think that, yes, he was high enough. High school was behind him now, and he didn't want to go to college — he hadn't even applied! — and he didn't want a job, and his best friend was God knew where. He could climb up on the railing and bend his knees and dive out past the gnarly twists of bean stem and the billows of honeysuckle blossoms, their viny stems twined around the beanstalk, arch his body against the sky, and plunge down headfirst upon the flagstoned patch that held the family's Neoform Armadon.

Instead, he leaned over the railing to wave away a drunken hummingbird and pluck a choice honeysuckle blossom, the size of a wineglass, its narrow base plump with nectar. He held it up to the light, marveling at its shadings of rose and cream, at how quickly the vine had grown that spring when the seed had appeared, dropped by some high-flying bird or planted by a wandering jonnyseeder, in the soil below. There had been no such thing just the year before. Now they were everywhere, and some people said they were a problem. But. . . .

Tommy's mother, Petra, had just plucked another for herself. He gestured with his own, though he knew she would not see his acknowledgment of what they shared. Then he tipped the blossom up and drained its liquid contents down his throat. He shuddered at the cloying sweetness, but he did not regret the dose. There was a self-fermented alcoholic tingle as well, and beneath that a mellowing, relaxing, euphoric haze. He stopped caring about friends, jobs, schools, long falls to nowhere, everything except reaching for another blossom.

"Hey, Ma! He's been suckin' honey again!"

Jimmy opened one eye. That was his kid brother, Caleb, taking a

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thirteen-year-old's malicious pleasure in the shit that was about to fly Jimmy's way. He was standing in the half-open door to the house, staring, grinning, at Jimmy sprawled in the wood-and-canvas deck chair, at the honeysuckle blossoms littering the floor around him, at one last blossom crushed in a sticky hand.

Jimmy wished his older sister were still at home. She would be more sympathetic. But she had gone off to college two years before, and. . . .

"Hey, Ma!"

It was not their mother who came to the door, one hand holding a glass of water, the other a pair of yellow pills. It was Dad: tall, thin to the point of gauntness, balding, his face lugubriously sad, his head shaking, his voice tsking, "Sober up, boy. You're supposed to be helping us get the carpet up. Not. . . ." With the hand that held the pills, he gestured toward the house next door. "You want to end up like Petra? She lost her son, not just a friend."

Jimmy made a face. Outlaw gengineers had turned the honeysuckle loose upon the world, and no one had been able to get rid of it since. But the biochemists, as ingenious in their way as the gengineers, had promptly devised an antidote for the euphoric in the nectar. The yellow pills contained a mixture of that antidote and the much older alcohol detoxicant. In mere moments his system was free of both drugs, and he was staring longingly once more at the pumpkin across the way. A best friend was not *just* a friend.

"C'mon, Jimmy." He shook Caleb's hand off his arm, levered himself out of his low seat, and followed his father into the living room. For a little while then, he helped move the couch, easy chairs, end tables, books, and bookcase into other rooms. Then he pried nails from the floorboards, rolled the old, worn carpet into a wormlike cylinder, sneezed at the dust he stirred, and marveled at the circular marks upon the wood beneath.

His mother blew her nose and ran her fingers across the marks. "Water stains," she said. She was Dad's total opposite: short, round, her hair thick and blonde. Caleb's hair was like hers. Jimmy's was thinner, drabber, like his father's. "And ground-in dirt. And just a hair of indentation. Someone had flower pots in here once. Heavy ones."

Jimmy wondered if that someone had been Tommy's father. But that thought evaporated as the carpet company's delivery van, a Bioblimp, arrived, lifted off the house's roof with its muscular tentacles, and re-

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placed the roll of old carpet with one of new. He stepped onto the deck once more to watch the van drift down the breeze, not yet using the propeller mounted on the rear of its crew pod. Its main ancestor had been some simple jellyfish. The gengineers had vastly enlarged it, swelled it up with hydrogen, given its tentacles muscles that belonged more properly to an octopus or squid, and equipped it with cargo pockets whose genes had come from kangaroos. Behind him, he could hear his mother running the vacuum cleaner across the bare floor, removing all the grit and dust that had sifted through and accumulated beneath the old carpet.

When the new carpet was in place and the furniture was restored to its positions, the whole family took their seats — Jimmy's mother and Caleb on the couch, Dad in his recliner, Jimmy in the antique wing chair — and admired the carpet. That was when Dad sighed and said, "Jim. We have got *to do something about you.*"

Jimmy shifted uncomfortably. Caleb snickered until his mother pinched his thigh.

"You've finished school,' Dad went on. "At least until you decide to go on. But you don't seem to want a job. And you're drinking far too much honeysuckle wine."

"Yessir," said Jimmy. He stared at the carpet between his feet, preferring its clean, fresh neutrality to the disapproval of his parents, or the glee of his little brother.

"If this keeps up," said Dad. "If this goes on, you'll be just another honey-suckin' bum."

Caleb managed to get out a single snicker before squeaking a muffled, "ouch!"

Dad slapped his thigh. "So," he said. "Tomorrow I'm taking you out to the Daisy Hill Truck Farm."

IT WAS a sad fact that the morning after tanking up on honeysuckle wine, antidote or no antidote, one had a headache — not the blinding sort, but a sullen, throbbing thing that would respond only to a nip of honey. The aspirin Jimmy found beside his breakfast plate were no help at all.

After breakfast, Dad led the way to the elevator that occupied the center of the beanstalk's supporting pillar. He did not let Jimmy have a

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moment on the deck to grab a honeysuckle blossom, and when they reached the ground, his hand on his son's shoulder kept Jimmy from stepping off the path.

"C'mon," he said. "You have your license." He steered Jimmy toward the door on the driver's side of the family Armadon and held it open. It revealed the bucket seats and control panels that occupied the space grown in the genimal's back, and when Jimmy climbed in, it closed with a solid "Chunkk!"

"But you still need practice. So you drive. I'll tell you when to turn."

The Armadon was a gengineered armadillo. Somewhat larger than a panel truck of the past century, it had no tail. The lower portion of its rigid hide swelled out to form four wheels, each one wearing a black rubber tire. The genimal's legs were mounted high, above the wheels, their joints reversed; as they ran, they pushed against the tires, spun the wheels on their bony hubs, and propelled the vehicle down the grass greenways that had replaced paved roads early in the Biological Revolution.

Obediently, Jimmy toggled the genimal out of its nighttime dormancy and took the tiller in his hand. He didn't have much to say. He knew about the truck farm, and he could guess why his dad wanted to take him there — Dad hoped he would get inspired, discover a vocation, swear off the honey forevermore, and straighten out. Fat chance, he thought.

Fortunately, the trip would not take long. There was, not far from their neighborhood, an entrance to the major highway that led traffic away from the city and toward the countryside where the land was available for truck farms and other agricultural operations. At this time of day, most of the traffic was city-bound commuters in wheeled Armadons and Roachsters; legged Hoppers, Tortoises, and Beetles; and grand Mack trucks hauling pods and trailers full of goods, chrome eighteen-wheelers dangling from collars beneath their bulldog jowls. An occasional police Hawk hovered overhead. A construction site featured long-legged Cranes and earthmoving Box Turtles. An Alitalia Cardinal and an American Bald Eagle circled above the local jetport. Shovel-jawed litterbugs patrolled the shoulder, darting at every break in the traffic onto the greenway to retrieve the wastes inevitably left behind the vehicles.

Honeysuckle vines covered the embankments beyond the shoulder, and in the shadows beneath an overpass, Jimmy noticed several full-time honey-suckers. Jimmy read the papers and knew that they died of mal-

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nutrition and disease and exposure and then fell prey to the omnipresent litterbugs, but he was not at all sure their fate was so horrible. They were the honey-bums his father prayed he would not join. They were poor and tattered, but such was the power of the euphoric in the honey they loved that they were nevertheless carefree and content with their lot. Was that indeed what awaited Jimmy? He didn't think that honeysuckle wine had that much of a hold on him, though he did love the stuff.

A Roadrunner roared past them, its rider bent low over the extended neck, his face hidden by a globular helmet. "Next exit," said Dad, and the highway gave way to a smaller road poorly enough maintained that in spots, where the turf was thin, the pavement of a generation before showed through. A few more miles, and they began to see the white-boarded fences of the truck farm. The barns became visible beyond a grove of trees, and then they could see the iron-barred runs, some of them containing young trucks. A herd of cattle, mingled Guernseys and Black Angus, milk and meat, grazed a pasture. The barns grew nearer, and the wide doors along their sides became visible, while Jimmy wondered at the lack of a farmhouse. By the road stood a low concrete building that looked like it must hold only offices. A truck, its trailer full of grain for feed, was backing into the farm's main drive.

There was no honeysuckle to be seen. If it had ever taken root here, the farm's staff had carefully eradicated it. Jimmy did not care whether the reason had been to keep the staff or the stock clean. He did care that it was absent, for he was beginning to crave a sip, just a sip, he told himself.

"Park there," said Dad. He pointed toward the side of the office building.

Jimmy nosed the Armadon into a space between a Roachster and an antique automobile whose axles were supported by metal jacks. The antique's paint was protected by a plastic tarpaulin. A medallion, left visible where the tarp did not cover, identified the car as an Oldsmobile.

As he shut their vehicle down, a door opened in the side of the building. Jimmy caught a glimpse of pastel walls, glass partitions, and elaborate computer workstations where, he would have guessed if he had cared, new trucks must be designed. Then he focused on the man stepping toward them. He was tall but heavyset, and the roundness of his face was accentuated by a receding hairline.

"Mr. Brane!" He met Jimmy's dad with a broad smile and an outstretched

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hand as he stepped from the Armadon. "This is your boy. I've been looking forward to meeting you both."

Jimmy scowled. He hadn't cared for patronizing sons of bitches when he was in high school, and he didn't like them now. He wished he dared to jump back in the Armadon and take off, but. . . . Honey or no honey, Dad would make his life miserable for sure. And he didn't really want to disappoint his parents. He was depressed for loss of his friend, but he did still love them. He supposed he even loved Caleb.

Their host gestured toward the nearest barn. "Call me Mike. Mike Nickers. We can begin the tour in here."

A narrow corridor ran down the center of the barn, with wooden doors opening into large bays. A small window in the nearest of the doors gave Jimmy a glimpse of something large and moving, but before he could identify it, their guide directed their attention to a large photo on one wall and said, "This is the bus barn. We've been trying to develop a good long-distance vehicle." He tapped the photo with an outstretched finger. "Years ago they tried to make a Greyhound, but the back wasn't strong enough, and it didn't have the stamina."

Despite himself, Jimmy was feeling some interest. "What about the Bernies? They're all over town."

Nickers nodded. "Their backs are O.K., but they still can't make the long trips." He led them to the first of the barn's bays and opened its door to reveal an immense genimal with six legs and a flattened back. The floor was covered with hay. A larger door at the other end of the bay opened to the outside. "We turned to peccary stock. We handled the back by giving it an extra pair of legs. Had to double the rib cage and pectoral girdle to make them work, but we got a double heart-lung system in the process, and that made the stamina beautiful."

"Couldn't you have done that with a Greyhound?" asked Jimmy's dad.

Nickers shrugged. "We tried. But it didn't turn out very well. And besides, we liked the name we got this way. We call 'em Roadhogs."

He led them past other bays. One contained a Roadhog with a bus-pod strapped on, and Jimmy realized why the gengineers had designed the back to be flat. Another contained a female Roadhog lying on its side with a litter of young rooted at her belly, nursing. In the last a female displayed a bulging belly. "As you can see," said Nickers, "we've entered the production phase. And in case you're wondering, the mating is handled by

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artificial insemination. The Bioform Regulatory Agency insisted that we remove any ability to respond to heat pheromones."

As he held the barn door open for them, he added, "Want some coffee?" Jimmy and his dad both nodded. He pointed — "Over here; it's the maternity ward for the trucks" — and led them to a small waiting room in the next barn.

When Jimmy entered the room, he found two young people clad in coveralls. They were not much older than he, and they wore shoulder patches marked with the farm's distinctive logo, a black-eared white beagle. Nickers closed the door, and the stertorous sounds of idling trucks elsewhere in the barn were slightly muffled. "Two of our trainees," he said. "Julie, Dan, this is Jimmy Brane."

Julie and Dan quickly finished their drinks, said, "Work to do," and left. When the others had full cups from the dispenser on the wall, Nickers showed them more bays, each of these containing a pregnant or nursing truck. Most showed their bulldog ancestry very clearly in their flattened faces. A few had a more wolfish appearance. "Husky stock," said Nickers. "For the far north." In each case the trucks' collar ornaments had been removed and hung from hooks on the walls.

Jimmy was pouring the last of his coffee into his mouth, thinking that it was a poor substitute for honeysuckle wine, when a sudden shout broke the quiet of the ward: "Get the tractor! Hurry!"

"Come on!" Nickers cried, throwing his empty cup into the nearest wastebasket. "Here's something most visitors don't get to see." They ran behind him to the bay at the far end of the barn and crowded together to peer through the glass. "Look at that big mother! That's our vet." Nickers pointed at a small woman in a white coat who was leaning over a truck whose sides, swollen until she looked more like an army tank than an oversized civilian dog, heaved with the convulsions of labor. The truck's panting breaths echoed in the bay.

The great door at the end of the bay was creaking upward. As soon as there was room, a old gasoline-powered farm tractor roared in, and a coveralled young man jumped off its seat.

"Chains!" cried the vet, and her assistant unwound heavy steel chains from the rear of the tractor and handed them to her.

Nickers explained: "It's a hard birth. With cattle, a come-along will do, but that just isn't powerful enough for a truck."

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The vet was up to her shoulders in the truck's birth canel, doing something with the chains. When she was done, she screamed at her assistant, "Get that thing turned around!" When he had obeyed, she attached the chains to a tie-ring behind the seat and screamed again: "Move!"

The engine roared, the chains grew taut, and there was a sucking sound as the newborn pup emerged into the world. The tractor stopped, the chains went slack, and the vet tenderly removed them from the infant truck. It was three times the size of an adult, unmodified Saint Bernard, but naked, wet, and blind. The mother extended one paw to rake it in close to her side, where it began to nuzzle while she licked it clean.

Nickers sighed with relief. "They'll both be all right." A moment later he said, "Look. The next one's coming on its own." Jimmy watched, and the tender smile on the vet's face brought an answering smile to his own, even as his fist clenched in sympathy with the laboring mother, and his nails drove into his palms. The vet obviously loved her giant charges, just as Jimmy had loved the mongrel bitch the Branes had once owned. Her name had been Ruffles. It had been the high point of his tenth year when she had had pups. But then they had had her spayed. She had disappeared when he was twelve.

"You'll love the next barn."

"What is it?" asked Jimmy.

But Nickers said nothing more, even when they stood outside their next stop. Instead, he simply opened the door, stood aside, and said, "We clean up every morning, but. . . ."

Jimmy and his dad both choked when the thick, pervasive odor hit them. Nickers only shrugged and smiled; he was used to it. It took a moment, but in the way of noses, Jimmy's soon stopped protesting, and he was able to step through the door.

This barn was not divided into bays. The door Nickers held open let them into a small chamber whose walls had been welded together from inch-thick steel bars. It reminded Jimmy of nothing so much as a shark cage, the kind used to protect tourists who want close looks at man-eaters. Similar cages enclosed the barn's other doors. Between the cages the barn was one cavernous room.

That room held at least fifty short-legged bulldog puppies. They ran in circles. They rolled. They yipped. They tumbled in fuzzy balls. They chewed on each other and old tires and logs. They lapped water that bub-

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bled up in a concrete basin. They sniffed assiduously in the corners of three food troughs that might each have held a whole Armadon. Some even slept, curled up wherever the hay that littered the floor had been swept by ceaseless motion into piles.

Jimmy did not appreciate the size of the puppies until they reacted to the presence of the three men in the entry cage. Then, as they all stopped running, rolling, yipping, tumbling, chewing, lapping, sniffing, and sleeping, and thundered toward the steel bars, he realized the truth: every one of those puppies was the size of an old-fashioned pickup truck.

Nickers shouted, "Down!" The pups sat quietly just outside the bars. They did not whine or growl or prance. Their tongues, the size of bedsheets, lolled. Their short tails hammered carefully on the concrete floor. Nickers unlatched a gate on the inner wall of the cage and indicated that Jimmy and his dad should go through. "They'll behave," he said. "Just watch your step."

"How do you ever housebreak them?" asked Dad.

"We don't. They're too big to come in the house, and outdoors there's usually a litterbug around."

Jimmy was paying no attention to the pragmatic conversation behind him. Nor was he thinking of honeysuckle wine, or of lost friends. He was stepping through the gate into the midst of the puppy throng, staring, reaching, petting, finding that their coats were much rougher than he had expected, but. . . . They were white, black, brown, spotted, cute and ugly, large and larger. He focused on one that reminded him of a dog he had once seen in an old, old movie: it was a dark brindle, with a single white circle around one eye. "You're Tige," he said, and he faced it, eye to barrel-sized eye, nose to wind-tunnel nose, and held out a hand for it to sniff.

Tige's mouth opened, and the immense tongue soaked the boy from foot to head.

Jimmy's fate was sealed.

"Yes," said Nickers later. "I'm a recruiter. And the pups are my best tool." They were in a small room in the farm's office building. The soft lighting was focused on Nickers's polished desk, though Nickers sat on a low couch against the wall. Jimmy and his dad faced him from comfortable armchairs across a coffee table bearing a single pristine sheaf of papers. All three once more had cups of coffee in their hands. "We put the word

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out, and parents bring kids who don't know what to do with their lives. We give 'em the four-bit tour, and then we let the pups do their best. Which is pretty good."

Jimmy was wearing a Daisy Hill Truck Farm coverall. His own clothes were tumbling in a dryer somewhere on the premises. Now he said, "So what'll it cost me to get Tige?"

"Not a nickel," said Nickers. He grinned and slapped one knee with a hand. "We don't sell the pups."

Jimmy's face fell.

"I don't recruit customers," he added. "But truckers. If you wish, you move into the dorm upstairs over the puppy barn, and we train you while the pup — Tige — grows up. You work around the farm — you met Julie and Dan — and help train Tige. Then you work for us as a trucker. Driving Tige. And in ten years, Tige is all yours."

Jimmy was silent, thinking that the deal sounded reasonable enough. He reached for the papers on the coffee table. The top one was a contract. The others were informational, telling him the rules of the establishment, what he should bring with him, where the nearest shopping areas and public-transportation stops were.

"One thing," said Nickers. "Your father's told me about the honey." He shook his head. "We tolerate none of that here. No drugs of any kind."

Somehow Jimmy was not surprised. It fitted what he had thought about why his dad had brought him here, and what he had seen — or failed to see — on the grounds. But the thought no longer bothered him. Tige had already begun to fill the void in his heart. He reached for the contract.

Nickers stopped him. "Not so fast. Take it with you, and think it over. For now. . . ." He rose and opened the office door. "Alex?" He turned back to Jimmy. "Another trainee. He'll get you your clothes. They should be dry by now. And you can keep the coverall."

"Those puppies," said Jimmy. "Do you remember Ruffles?" The farm's contract and other papers were on the kitchen table. The coverall was draped over a chair so the shoulder-patch logo showed clearly.

"But they're so huge!" cried his mother. The whole family was sitting around the table. Jimmy's head was bent, his hands clasped before him, his voice soft. The others' eyes shifted constantly from the coverall to Jimmy to the contract, and back again.

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"Yeah!" said Caleb. "Though I'd rather have a Roadrunner."

"If I drive Tige for just ten years, he'll be all mine." He was thinking the farm's deal over, he was, though he didn't expect the process to make much difference. Puppies and their all-forgiving, all-compensating love were not just for little kids, and if he had to become a trucker to get Tige, he would.

"And what then? How will you feed him?"

"I'll have to stay a trucker, won't I?"

"A mack that big is no pet."

And Jimmy thought: Was puppy love no more than a trap, a lure for a vocation that would forevermore have him hustling to feed the pup, as well as himself, and eventually a family? Nickers had said as much, hadn't he?

"You won't be able to veg out on honeysuckle wine," said Caleb. There was a touch of "nyahh-nyahh" whine in his voice, but Jimmy ignored it. Nickers had said that, too, and though his head still ached and somewhere deep inside him lurked a craving for the honey, he thought he could handle it. He was not, after all, addicted to the stuff. He liked it, he wanted it, but it did not rule him the way it did the honey-bums he had seen under the highway overpasses.

Jimmy reached for the contract, drew it closer, and paused. He looked within himself for the honey craving, and he measured it against his craving for Tige, for maturity, for life.

He straightened his back and looked at his dad, sitting across the table. His mother noticed and began to cry.

"Got a pen, Dad?"

His father quietly drew a pen from his shirt pocket and, his own eyes glistening, held it out.

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This superior tale is young (25) Catherine Cooke's first short story sale, however she is already an accomplished novelist, with two published fantasy trilogies. Her most recent books are THE HIDDEN TEMPLE (TOR) and THE CRIMSON GODDESS (Ace). Ms. Cooke lives in Orange, California, where she is pursuing a degree in English literature.

The Bat-Winged Knight

By Catherine Cooke

LORD WILMAR'S BRIDE was seduced by a vampire on the eve of her wedding day. When she was brought to bed with child in due course, the midwife took the baby quickly before the lady could see it, and told her it had been born dead. Natalya mourned her loss. Her husband's priests told her it was God's will, which did not console her. Lord Wilmar told her she was young and strong and would bear him many brave sons. That was not a pleasant thought so soon after her first painful labor; but she had been afraid he would be angry with her, and was glad for his awkward concern.

The baby's cries were easily muffled, more like the high, piping sounds of a bat than the furious bellows of a newborn boy. The midwife felt only a little fear, and no guilt, as she hurried through the forest at sunset with the quiet bundle in her sack. If the mother had seen the child, she would have wanted to keep him. His tiny features and wet black curls had promised beauty. But the priests would have taken one look and

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ordered the baby killed as Devil's spawn. The boy's father was neither Lord Wilmar nor the Devil; only the vampire of the forest cave could have gotten such a son.

When the woman reached the cave, she set the baby down on a flat stone before the entrance. The last leaf shadows of daylight were blurred and formless now. It was dark and cold, and her courage was almost gone. "Here is your son, old leech," she said in a spiteful voice that masked her trembling. "Kill him or keep him, as you choose. The mother never saw him and thinks him dead. I have already forgotten him and you and this night." She thought she saw a pale face at the cave mouth. She did not wait to see more, but turned and ran.

The vampire's name had been Albern five hundred years ago when he was lord of the castle. His line had died out long ago, but he lived on comfortably in his tomb beyond the western wall. He was not a killer, but brought fair dreams to maidens of the village and to stray woodcutters and huntsmen in the forest. The vampire had few enemies, until two years ago, when Wilmar and the other invaders had come with new laws and stern priests. So he was surprised and bewildered one late night to find that he could not return to his tomb to rest. Wilmar had commanded the priests to consecrate the ground. There had been a terrible hunt, and a chase that nearly found the vampire exposed on a riverbank at dawn, until he had burrowed into a badger hole to escape the sun.

Since then he had made this cave his home. He would have left the country if he could, but it was his native soil and he was bound to it. So he lived quietly, knowing that Wilmar and his priests feared the forest and its legends. The villagers knew where to find him, but they left him in peace, out of respect perhaps for his age and the tales of him that had frightened them as children.

His visit to Natalya that night had been as much revenge as he dared attempt. He had thought to attack her, drain her to swooning, perhaps even carry her off into the forest. But she was so terribly young and lovely that he had taken her in his arms and through some gentle magic made love to her as a human man might. This was the result.

The vampire bent over the tiny child and picked him up in pale, long-fingered hands. At first he thought the baby was wrapped in a leathery gray blanket, but then he unfolded the swaddling and found it to be wings. Bat's wings, like those he sprouted when he was transformed into

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his favorite shape. Large enough to take the child's weight in flight, they curved out from the back of a perfectly formed human baby.

"Your mother must be faery at least by half," said the vampire in a voice like the hiss of rain on leaves. "Or she would never have quickened by me, and she could not have borne you. I wonder what Wilmar would say if he guessed that." He laughed, a sound like a bellows, air in and air out with no pitch or resonance. He had lost a pleasing human voice when he had died of a wasting fever; his was the voice of a dead man, made of stolen air forced into a stiff, dry throat.

"I will call you Stefan," hissed the vampire to the baby who could not yet understand his words. It was the name of his mortal son, who had died an old man 450 years ago.

He held the baby to his chill breast and wrapped a cloak around them both. He could not fly as a bat or run wolf-legged with a child in his arms, so he walked to a cottage he knew near the forest's edge where a young mother slept with full breasts. The vampire and the baby drank what they needed and left the woman dreaming of a noble lover's touch.

The valley ruled by Lord Wilmar had always been a half-magical place, with thick forest on one side and high mountains beyond. The mountains still were wild. No priest had yet given saints' names to their peaks and crags, and so the faery races had retreated there. Young fey princes still sometimes rode through the woods and lured village girls and young matrons from berry-picking and wood-gathering.

When Stefan was five and beginning to learn the use of his wings, he saw what happened to babies born from those brief unions. One night he heard a thin cry, and alighted in a tree to look. A newborn infant with pointed ears, pale green eyes, and white-blond hair lay swaddled and helpless at the edge of a path Stefan knew was much used by wild beasts.

The boy hurried back to his father and begged him to save the baby and keep it as a pet. The vampire told him gently that they could do nothing but leave it to its fate. It was difficult enough to shelter one bat-winged boy from human eyes in the dark woods. There would be many more such waifs — the priests refused to baptize any infant that showed faery blood, and the mothers had no choice but to abandon the children.

Stefan knew that he was a magical creature, a boy with bat's wings whose skin burned at the touch of the sun's rays, who could not touch

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running water without pain. He felt a fierce kinship with the lost babies, and a hatred of the priests who called them devils' children. He dreamed of one day leading a faery army in vengeance, sweeping through the valley to destroy the cruel Lord Wilmar and his kind. He often went to watch the infants after the first one died, and sometimes he threw stones to keep wolves away. Surely the fathers of the babies must know what was happening to them; and yet through the years no faery prince ever rode up to rescue one.

SOMETIMES MAGIC appeared in half-blood children only when they left childhood. Occasionally youths and maidens were found out, and stoned to death, since they could not merely be abandoned in the forest. The villagers might have been reluctant to turn against children they had known all their lives, but the priests solemnly told them that all the evil in the land could be traced to the Devil's spawn among them.

Since the invaders had come, life was gray and hard in the villages. Crops grew and cows calved, but neither as abundantly as they once had, when fertility magic had livened the spring festivals. People feared to go into the forests and no longer dared to travel to the mountains for the winter hunting; the faeries were angry, it was said, and would attack travelers, killing them or binding them with ageless spells.

One dangerous spirit they had a name for: the Bat-winged Knight. He had appeared one evening at a narrow bridge on the forest road to demand the gold and the goods of a covey of priests. He had left them only their mules in the dark, and they were lost for days in the woods before they stumbled out again. Soldiers rode into the forest to challenge the knight, who wore a coat of faery mail that covered even the tips of his wings with softly jangling scales. Some men came back defeated. Others never returned.

Nobles and priests and wealthy traveling merchants all feared the Bat-winged Knight. Poorer villagers whispered that he would fly among their houses in the early hours before dawn and leave spoils from his thieving. Gold they dared not spend, jewels they dared not wear — yet maybe one day they could use his gifts. They dreamed of a savior who would lift the grayness and bring back the color that had once filled their lives.

* * *

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When the pain under her shoulder blades began, Ileya straightened her back wearily and looked at the bucket of puny, disease-spotted turnips she had dug this afternoon in her family's garden plot at the forest's edge. Today was her fourteenth birthday, the eighteenth year of Wilmar's reign. Her mother had kissed her this morning and asked if she was well, and Ileya had wondered at the concern in her voice.

Long forest shadows reached over the dirt and weeds of the stony garden, spreading to narrow the thin, slanted rays of sunlight that remained. Ileya wrapped her shawl over her coiled braids, hating the close warmth of the wool around her face and neck; now that she was a woman, she must put her hair up and keep it covered when there was anyone to see. She stood up and gasped as her back arched with pain, arrows embedded under bone. She tried to lift the turnip bucket and fell back to her knees, looking up at the dusky forest through tears that made the trees liquid, like algae wavering in pond water.

Her mother had looked at her this morning as if she saw a ghost, with an old fear Ileya remembered dimly from her childhood. Still Ileya did not understand until she felt the webbing press out against her woolen dress and split the fabric in two long rents down the back. Her wings unfolded, covered with wet down like a chick from the egg, and under the down they were translucent, filtering the sunset light into diamond butterfly patterns on the ground in front of her.

The pain had stopped, but she wept bitterly as she stumbled to her feet and fled into the forest. The pretty, fragile wings clung wetly to her dress and her arms and trailed their ends in the loam behind her as she ran. It was already dark beneath the trees, and Ileya saw wolves behind every bole, and keening, jealous ghosts clutching at her in every tree branch. She thought of vampires and demons and arrogant faeries with thin faces and pale eyes. One such being must have beguiled her mother fifteen years ago, and left her to wonder afterward if her daughter had been born of her husband's rough caresses or a memory of pleasure beside a forest stream.

Stefan wished he had a knight's horse, a great black charger with jeweled stirrups and breastplate and a high, proud head in an armored mask with horns beside its ears. He could have purchased such a horse with the money he took from travelers; but a horse's tracks were too easy to follow through the forest, and the places where it ate and slept could not be

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hidden in a few moments. So Stefan walked along his secret path, waiting for the sunset.

His scale armor murmured when he walked, like water over stones, as light and flexible as water; when he had gone to the faeries of the mountains two years ago, they had made the armor for him in a kind of silent apology. They refused to ride into battle against Lord Wilmar, giving no reason, though Stefan guessed they feared the new human magic of the priests. His father the vampire had been driven from his home by that magic. Stefan had called the faeries cowards with a boy's bitter righteousness, and stalked off in his new armor, swearing to undertake the war by himself.

After two years he was still alone. He had thought to gain allies in the villages with his gifts of gold, but peasants in the woods still crossed themselves and shrieked exorcisms when they met him on the path. By day, Stefan's armor protected him from the sun and the weapons of Lord Wilmar's soldiers; and by night, when he took off the armor to fly, he could best any man sword to sword from above. It was not enough; it was not what he had promised the faeries he would do.

His steps were soft on the matted forest floor as night gathered around him, and his eyesight dimmed and his hearing sharpened. Trees rustled with wakening owls. He bent down to touch a night-blooming flower and felt it curling open against his fingers. A nest of phosphorescent mushrooms glowed beside a tree root, and he gathered four from the edges of the cluster to eat before he rested.

As he neared the river and the vampire's cave, a woman's sobbing rose distinct from the other sounds of rushing water and leaves in the breeze. Stefan listened in stillness for a moment. Then, with the slightest brush of armored scales, he crept to the top of the riverbank and saw the girl poised to leap into the rocks where the water rushed deepest.

Her wings were all of her he could see clearly, and he thought that she must be a faery. But no faery had been this near the villages in ten years or more, and no faery would try to drown herself in the river, a useless gesture for an immortal to make. He guessed then that this was one of the half-blood children with a sudden magical gift, who had run into the forest to choose her own death.

The helpless, thin faces of swaddled babies swept through his memory, and a distant stoning he had watched from the forest edge where the

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victim had been a boy child staked between posts. The vampire had said he would only endanger himself if he tried to rescue any of them. Stefan stepped down from the turf onto gravel; the girl turned with a shimmer of wings and glistening, tear-wet eyes.

"You mustn't jump," he said. "You may be the first one to escape them. If you come with me. . . ." He had been going to say he would take her to the faeries, who would have to take her in as their kindred, but the girl gave a soft, choked cry of terror and leaped into the swirling black water.

She was tossed like a leaf in the current, her delicate wings spreading by instinct to keep her from sinking, but rocks scraped at her as she tumbled past, and the whitecaps slapped her face down into the river again and again. She did not cry out for help.

Stefan had learned early to fear running water. He had never waded in the river, never drunk from its edge, never bathed in it; he had relied on a still, spring-fed pool behind the vampire's cave. Yet now he ran along the riverbank, fumbling with his fingers for the catches at either side of his armor, tripping on tree roots and hopping from foot to foot to pull his scale boots free, jerking his wings from their casings with a violence that sent the split halves of armor flying into the forest.

When he was free, he spread his leathery wings to their fullest stretch and leaped into the night air, flapping twice, three times, until he knew he was flying, then folding his wings back to dive at the last place he had seen the girl go under.

The water clenched Stefan's body into rigid cramps, so cold that he almost breathed in with the shock of it; the motion of the swift current made him feel sick and dizzy, and he could scarcely keep his eyes open to look for the girl. She was not there. He surfaced again and flapped his sodden wings to keep himself afloat; at one edge of the river, where the current eddied and slowed, was a tangle of fallen trees and living roots. He dove there and found her.

Her limp, heavy body was caught underwater, an edge of one translucent wing trailing broken, wavering in the current. Stefan held himself under by one hand on a root and pulled the branches away from the girl's form. She slid away from him, freed, to travel farther, but he let go and swam to catch her in both arms. His wings propelled them both back to the water's edge, and he found his feet on land and dragged the girl up onto the gravel of the riverbank.

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The winged girl lay facedown, and Stefan knelt above her and pressed on her back.

Moonlight pooled there, sifting through a gap in the forest canopy by the river. The winged girl lay facedown, and Stefan knelt above her and pressed on her back, lifted and shook her, took hold of her arms and pumped them back and forth like oars. The running water had sapped his strength, and he sweated and shivered by turns. He had rescued her; she must not die.

Her wings fluttered violently and hit Stefan in the face. He sat down beside her, rubbing his cheek. The girl coughed up river water and panted for breath; when his dizziness subsided a little, Stefan lifted her in his arms and carried her up to the forest turf at the top of the bank. She moaned in pain when he lay her down again, and he could see the bent wing beginning to swell, and cuts and bruises on her arms and legs where she was not covered by her heavy woolen dress.

She was very young, slightly built but not as frail as faery women Stefan had seen. Her butterfly wings looked too delicate to lift her weight. They were the only truly beautiful thing about her; her face was thin and her eyes hollow, as if she had never eaten very well, and her dark braided hair was dull and did not gleam in the moonlight. Yet she seemed precious to him.

He knelt beside her, fighting back black-edged waves of sickness that brought him near fainting. "I couldn't let you die," he said. "I'm sorry."

"You're the one they talk about, the demon in the woods." She seemed too exhausted now to be afraid. "You were silver before, with scales."

"I took my armor off to go after you. Do you think you can walk?" Stefan helped her to her feet, and led her along the overgrown path to the vampire's cave.

Albern showed his son how to press the bent wing straight and tend the bruises, and he told Stefan that rest was the only cure for the sickness that came from running water. The vampire was a gentleman, after his fashion, and Stefan did not have to tell him that Ileya could not supply him with blood; so he hunted by night and slept by day, and left the two young outcasts alone.

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In three days, Ileya could not remember how it had felt to want to die. She listened to Stefan's dreams of overthrowing Lord Wilmar and bringing magic back to the valley. Her own dreams were quieter — a simple walk to the mountains to find a place to live in peace. But she could not leave her parents to wonder if she was alive; so when she was well enough, Stefan put on his armor to take her to the forest's edge. She wore her old dress with a thick shawl around her head and shoulders, her wings tightly folded beneath the cloth. They reached the clearings by sunset.

"You must go only to your parents' cottage and speak to no one else, and I will wait for you at the forest's edge," he said. They kissed in the shadows of the leaves, and parted.

Ileya crossed the fields, slow and hunchbacked like an old woman, startling a rabbit and three blackbirds into flight. Her parents' cottage was dark and deserted; the village square burned with torchlight in the dusk, and she could hear singing and stamping feet. They had gone to the festival, though their daughter was lost, perhaps dead in the forest.

She glanced back at the dark line of trees and saw no glimmer of faery armor, but she knew Stefan was still there. The delicate wings at her back stirred and quivered with the oncoming night; she folded them again and pulled her shawl more firmly together at the shoulders. She owed her father and mother at least a short farewell. She would leave as soon as she found them in the square.

In front of the stone porch of the church, skirts whirled and hands clapped in the smoky air as the young men and women danced to celebrate a wedding Lord Wilmar had just performed. Ileya circled the back of the crowd, remembering that she had been eagerly awaiting this day; five couples were to be wed, and six babies baptized, during the lord's visit to the village.

Wilmar stood like a gray-topped pillar on the church steps with three of his soldiers and two priests. Ileya ducked behind a wall to avoid the gaze of his stern blue eyes, as if he could see through her clothes and mark her as a half blood from such a distance in the dusk. She feared to be recognized by anyone she knew; everyone must know by now about her disappearance. She had been gone for three days.

At last she saw her mother's face turn to her out of the crowd, and her eyes widen. Ileya beckoned to her to be silent and follow, but her mother

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cried out her daughter's name and ran to her with half the village whirling to see.

"Where have you been, Ileya? I thought you were surely dead, taken by the vampire or the wolves or the bat-demon in the forest. . . ." Her mother hugged her and began to weep.

"What happened, girl?" Her father scowled as he stepped out from a group of men. "Did you learn you could call down rain from the skies, or make fire, or walk invisible? Don't deny it. Your mother confessed yesterday that one of the forest demons fathered you."

Ileya turned to run, but people encircled her now. "The change shows in her face, look," said one of the priests. "There is a light in her eyes that is not from God."

"Oh my child, why did you come back?" her mother whispered as her husband pulled her away.

"Stefan!" Ileya screamed. "Stefan, help me!" The blacksmith and a priest caught her and grasped her arms, and Lord Wilmar walked slowly down through the stilled dancers. The circle around Ileya parted to let him through.

"What sign has been found in her?" he asked, looking coldly at Ileya. She felt her legs weaken and her wings begin to flutter in fear.

"At her back there, something moves," said the priest. They took away her shawl and tore the back of her dress. With a rustling shudder, Ileya's wings unfolded and spread like colored glass behind her, reflecting the light of the smoky torches. Some in the crowd thought of beauty glimpsed on forest paths when they were young; more than one woman gasped and looked away out of bitter memories of wonder. Lord Wilmar commanded they should lock her in the smithy until dawn, when she must be stoned.

"Let her go," said a cool young voice, and in the same moment an arrow whirred like a bee past Ileya's head to burrow into the lord's shoulder as he turned to step behind a guardsman. Wilmar staggered and clutched his arm, and the priest holding Ileya stepped forward in horror. She twisted out of the blacksmith's grasp.

Stefan gleamed red and orange in the torchlight, like a demon indeed in his close-fitting armor. His wings were spread high above his shoulders, making jagged shadows that fell across the faces of the crowd. He cast down his bow and drew a thin sword, and Ileya saw the pleading in his eyes that she run and leave him.

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Soldiers charged past, ignoring Ileya, and before the people of her village could remember to hold her down, she sprang into the air with her wings beating as quickly as a hummingbird's. She struggled to climb past the rooftops, and then looked down from the height of the church steeple. Her new back muscles began to ache with the unaccustomed effort, but she could fly. She saw Stefan engulfed by a sea of clubs and quarterstaves. He could not escape to join her; the sun had just set, and he still wore his armor.

"Shoot the witch down!" a priest cried, and one of the soldiers unslung a longbow and began to fit an arrow to the string. Sobbing, Ileya flung herself through the air over the cottages, over the fields, above the treetops of the black night forest. She heard them say behind her that the Bat-winged Knight would be taken to the castle to be tried, and he would be burned in the morning for his attempt to kill Lord Wilmar.

The vampire's cave was empty and dark when Ileya came to earth beside it, gasping for air from the effort of her long flight. She could hear the distant calls of villagers searching in the forest for her. She could not stay here, and she did not know where else to go. Wings trembling at her shoulders, she sat down on a flat rock outside the cave and stared at the rippling moon reflections of the forest river down the slope. She wished now that she had died there.

A long time passed, hours perhaps, before a wolf running on three legs lurched into the moonlit clearing. Ileya watched it crouch before the cave and change back into Albern the vampire, naked and wounded with an arrow in the thigh. "The forest is full of madmen tonight," the vampire breathed in his raspy voice. "I was fortunate it was one of Wilmar's soldiers who shot me, so the arrow had a metal point." He gripped it with long-nailed fingers and drew it out of his leg. No blood flowed.

"They search for me," Ileya said, hoarse from weeping. "Lord Wilmar is wounded, and they have Stefan prisoner. They will burn him at the stake in the morning."

The pale, still face turned to her as the vampire rose to his feet. "Morning sun will kill him sooner than fire. They have taken him to the castle?"

"Yes. He shot Lord Wilmar to save me. I love him, and now he will die."

"You must go to him." The vampire could not fly in bat's form with a wounded wing, and the distance was too far for him to travel in man's

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form and be back to his cave at sunrise. If Ileya flew with the speed of the wind, she might reach Lord Wilmar's castle an hour or two before dawn. Albern had haunted the dungeons and catacombs of the old castle for five hundred years. He could tell her how to reach the prisoner, and where the dungeon guards kept their keys.

So Ileya flew in desperate hope, straining her eyes in the moonlight for a glimpse of landmarks the vampire had described for her, not daring to stop for rest for fear she would be too late. The burning in her muscles was like a fire within her body, and her wings whirred slower and slower as she approached the castle.

Water in the moat before the spiked gate reflected the blazing torches, as if swarms of fireflies skimmed its surface. High, ruined battlements overtopped the wall, and in the center an ancient keep rose on a man-made mound of earth and rock. The early-morning sky was dark except for a vague graying in the east, and Ileya's leg collapsed under her when she reached the ground in the shadows of crumbling mausoleums on the hillside behind the castle.

Before the invaders had come, people had buried their dead away from the places where the living dwelt, for fear of ghosts and creatures like Albern. Now the slab floors of churches covered the restless dead, and the priests' magic seemed enough to keep them bound in their graves. Ileya hobbled through an iron gateway into the untended cemetery, thinking wistfully of the vampire's description of his comfortable old tomb. It was consecrated ground now, and he could not inhabit it; perhaps the other spirits that had once been here were also gone.

Thorns gripped the cracked stones of the dome that bore Lord Albern's crest, and the reaching fingers of twisted vines had wrenched open the massive door. There were no rats or beetles here, where the dead man had never decayed. Only the thick dust and piles of windblown leaves pressed against the stone box of Albern's coffin. Ileya brushed aside the priests' wafers and ignored a cross that had been recently engraved into the lid. Her strength was scarcely enough to lift the slab a bare inch and push it back at an angle.

In the earth at the coffin's bottom was the imprint of a man's body, packed almost as hard as layered rock by the passing days of centuries. At one edge was a bronze handgrip, and Ileya grasped it and pulled up. The hard earth lifted with the coffin bottom, and a hole like a black mouth

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gaped beneath it. A rotting wooden ladder leaned at the side of the hole, and there was a hinged brace to prop against the bottom section of the coffin to keep it open. This was the way Albern had gotten in and out of the castle.

Her wings fluttering close to her body, Ileya climbed into the cool darkness of the shaft. She would never have found the courage to go deeper into the black earth without the image of her love that she kept in her mind, and the thought that he would surely die if she did not reach him before the executioners did. Ancient stone tunnels and mold-furred rooms led toward the castle dungeons; long before even Albern's reign, they had held hidden stores and arms, a refuge for the lord and his people if the keep was taken by enemies.

At last Ileya reached a place where smoke from a wall torch drifted toward a narrow slit in the side of the tunnel. She looked through the hole and saw the weapons and armor of a guards' storeroom. Albern had told her how to push in on a part of the wall, and the door swung outward just enough for her to slip through. She braced it with a crate of crossbow bolts and took a guards' cloak from a wall hook to throw over her wings and her untidy braids. A ring of keys hung by the door. She took them.

She had not allowed herself to imagine that Stefan might be held in a tower or in the main hall; now those fears crowded in on her as she watched patrolling guards and crept from cell to cell. Lord Wilmar had few prisoners. The men she saw looked like the lord's own soldiers, being disciplined for drunkenness or some infraction of military rules. Stefan hung against the wall of the deepest cell, still in his faery armor, suspended by outstretched arms from manacles that fit tightly over his scale gloves. His wings were spread stiffly against the stones.

Ileya unlocked the door and slipped inside the dark cell, shutting the door again and closing the metal flap over an observation hole above the handle. "My love. . . ." She went to him.

"Ileya? How . . . how did you come here? They will catch you; you must go quickly. . . ." He pulled weakly against his chains.

"Are you hurt?" She hugged him around the waist.

"My head buzzes where they hit me," he said. She could see only his eyes through the openings in his cowl. "And I cannot feel my shoulders anymore. How did you get inside the castle? I can scarcely believe you're here."

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The vampire told me a way. I must hurry. One of these keys will open your chains." She reached up on tiptoe, fluttering her wings a little for balance.

He turned his armored head to watch her try different keys in the lock of one manacle. "We'll have to escape into the mountains. Wilmar might even follow us there. . . ." He grew quiet. Then he murmured, "No. We must be free of him. Ileya, lock it again."

"What?" She had finally discovered the right key.

"Leave the manacles," he said slowly. "Undo the catches of my armor, under my ribs on each side, so I can pull out of it quickly with a shrug of my wings. Then go. Go back however you got here, and wait for me in the forest with Albern."

She settled back to earth, feeling hollow and tired. "You will try to kill Lord Wilmar."

"I must. Wait for me, Ileya. I'll come to you again; I swear it."

MORNING SUN slowly brought color to the high battlements, and shadow began to recede in the courtyard. Stefan watched from the place where he was tied, listening to the murmurs of the crowd that had gathered to see the Bat-winged Knight roast inside his devil's armor. At his brief trial last night, Lord Wilmar had commanded his soldiers to take the armor off, but none of them could find any fastenings. They had tried again this morning, and failed. So they had tied him standing between two stakes, his wings and arms outspread, but only his armor was truly bound by the ropes.

Lord Wilmar's seat was carried to a place in the center of the courtyard opposite Stefan, and four priests stood behind it. Stefan felt the first rays of the sun touch his armor; heat gathered around his legs, and he realized the soldiers had lit the pyre of brush and thorns. He pulled slightly against the ropes that bound him, and felt the halves of his armor begin to creak apart. The sun would hurt him, he knew, but if he moved very quickly and escaped afterward into some dark place, he might still meet Ileya in the forest tonight. She would be safe, at least. With Wilmar dead, she and the other half-blood children would no longer be slain for their beauty.

Lord Wilmar walked into the sunlight heralded by a shrill trumpet that hurt Stefan's ears, followed by a soldier carrying a long pike with a curved blade. Stiff-necked, with a grim smile, the invader lord settled himself into

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his chair of state and leaned forward to watch the execution of his enemy. He wore a gilt-edged sling on his wounded arm, and his eyes were dark-rimmed. He had not slept well the past night, it seemed.

Now you will sleep, Stefan thought. He flexed his wings in one powerful beat, and the glittering faery armor shivered in halves, front and back, and fell away through the smoke. Stefan heard screams and soldiers' shouts, but he kicked his feet from the close-fitting scale boots and leaped straight ahead into flight, through the rising flames toward Lord Wilmar.

The sun seared him, charred him; he felt blisters bubbling up on his skin even under his silken clothes, and his wings smoked in wisps that thickened as he flew. His eyesight dimmed, but he could see the lord's chair, as Wilmar rose to his feet in confusion. Then he was diving, swooping down to wrest the long pike away from the guardsman by Wilmar's side. The weapon turned like a live thing in his hands, and he drove it down through Lord Wilmar's chest. Shocked, staring up at Stefan in disbelief, Wilmar fell to his knees and began to die.

The Bat-winged Knight flew up into the consuming heat of the morning sun, blinded now, his hands and face blackened, his wings aflame. Arrows swarmed around him, pierced him. The heavy beats of the leathery wings grew slower, slower, until they failed to beat again. He had reached the topmost windows of the highest tower, when the fire engulfed him.

Ileya screamed when she saw him burning, and leaped off the highest tower, where she had waited since before dawn. She held out the guard's cloak she had stolen in the storeroom, thinking to wrap Stefan in it and beat out the flames, but she could not fly near him for the heat. She cried out his name and saw his head turn toward her before fire roared around and through him and he was gone.

On the ancient stones of the tower was seared a black silhouette: a young man's body bent in an agonized arch, with outspread, jagged-edged wings. Nothing else remained. Nothing fell to the courtyard below, where soldiers lowered their bows and priests gathered like crows around the body of Lord Wilmar.

Ileya flew upward through the lingering smoke, back over the broken battlement onto the top of the tower. She fell to her knees on the cold stones, unable to breathe, unable to weep, clutching the thick woolen cloak that would have hidden him from the sun. She had been so certain

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that he would reach her, that they would escape together. He had burned up like a dry leaf ignited in a hot summer wind.

As the people of the castle left the place of execution, Ileya felt the flames still blazing inside her. She thought of the vampire who slept oblivious in his forest cave. Would he mourn the loss of his son, she wondered, or would he only feel a vague regret, as for the passing of a beautiful springtime? His memories were so long. Ileya had had only a few days.

A century ago the stairs of this tower had collapsed, and it was hollow inside; no man could climb it to come after her. It was safe for her to wait. When it was quiet below in the courtyard, Ileya flew down from the tower to land in the warm ashes of the execution pyre. The two halves of Stefan's armor shimmered in the sunlight, still tied between the posts. Ileya gathered them up and refastened them on either side, smoothing out the scales on the limp, hollow wings. She flew past the outspread silhouette on the tower wall, over the battlements and the ancient mausoleums into a breeze from the forest, clasping the armor to her breast.

She had nowhere else to go but the vampire's forest cave, and no wish to live any longer in the sunlight. Two separate and solitary beings, she and Albern were little comfort for one another. Ileya wandered at night under the cool moonlight shadows of the trees, thinking that someday the vampire might return to his old tomb to sleep undisturbed, and she would be alone in the forest. Magic had begun to bleed back slowly into the world, as the priests and soldiers were called away to a distant war and no invader lord was sent to take Wilmar's place.

One midnight, Ileya heard the bells of faery horses, and she waited curiously on the path to see. The faeries had come down from the mountains in great numbers, men and women with faces like clear ice, beautiful and cold. The tall riders halted and looked down at her with troubled smiles; she felt ashamed of her half-blood wings and her thick human body. She met their eyes again when she remembered that they had refused to follow Stefan to war against Lord Wilmar. He had won their battle for them.

"She must be the one," a faery prince said in her language, in response to an argument from another of his company. He dismounted and held out a thin hand of greeting to Ileya. "You are the girl, the one who tried to save the Bat-winged Knight. I have heard the tale. They say that the

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Kim Stanley Robinson wrote "The Return from Rainbow Bridge," (August 1987). He presently lives in Maryland, but for a year or more, he and his wife lived in Switzerland, which stay generated the offbeat story below. . .

Zürich

By Kim Stanley Robinson

WHEN WE WERE getting ready to leave Zürich I decided to try to leave our apartment as clean as it had been when we moved into it two years before. An employee of the Federal Institute of Technology, owners of the building, would be coming by to inspect the place, and these inspections were legendary among the foreign residents living in the building: they were *tough*. I wanted to be the first *Ausländer* to make an impression on the inspector.

Certainly this wasn't going to be easy; the apartment's walls were white, the tables were white, the bookcases and wardrobes and bedtables and dressers and bedframes were white. In short practically every surface in the place was white, except for the floors, which were a fine blond hardwood. But I was getting good at cleaning the apartment, and having lived in Switzerland for two years, I had a general idea what to expect from the inspection. I knew the standard that would be applied. My soul rose to the challenge, and defiantly I swore that I was going to leave the place *immaculate*.

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Soon I realized how difficult this was going to be. Every scuff from a muddy shoe, every drip of coffee, every sweaty palm, every exhalation of breath had left its mark. Lisa and I had lived here in our marvelous domestic chaos, and the damage proved it. We had put up pictures and there were holes in the walls. We had never dusted under the beds. The previous tenant had gotten away with things, having moved out in a hurry. It was going to be difficult.

Immediately it was obvious to me that the oven was going to be the crux of the problem. You see, once we went over to some American friends to have a home-like barbecue, the grill out on the balcony up on the fifth floor in the town of Dübendorf, looking out at all the other apartment blocks, the fine smell of barbecued chicken and hamburger spiralling out into the humid summer sky, when there was the howl of siren below, and a whole fleet of fire engines docked and scores of firemen leaped out — all to combat our barbecue. One of the neighbors had called the police to report a fire on our balcony. We explained to the firemen and they nodded, staring coldly at the clouds of thick smoke filling the sky, and suddenly it seemed to us all that a barbecue was a very messy thing indeed.

So I never bought a grill for the balcony of our apartment. Instead I broiled our teriyaki shish-ka-bob in the oven, and it tasted all right. We use a fine teriyaki sauce, my mother got the recipe out of a magazine years ago; but it calls for brown sugar, and this was the source of the problem. When heated, the liquefied brown sugar carmelizes, as Lisa and her chemist colleagues are wont to say; and so on every interior surface of the oven there were little brown dots that refused to come off. They laughed at Easy Off, they laughed at Johnson and Johnson's Force. I began to understand that carmelization is a process somewhat like ceramic bonding. I needed a laser, and only had steel wool. So I began to rub.

It was a race between the flesh of my fingertips and the brown ceramic dots; which would the steel wool remove first? Flesh, of course; but it grows back, while the dots didn't. Only the miracle of regeneration allowed me to win this titanic battle. Over the course of the next two days (and imagine spending fifteen hours staring into a two-foot cube!) I muscled off every single dot, hour by hour becoming more and more enraged at the stubbornness of my foe.

Eventually the victory was mine; the oven was clean, a sparkling box

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of gray-black metal. It would pass the inspection. I stalked through the apartment in an ecstasy of rage, promising similar treatment for every other surface in the place.

I attacked the rest of the kitchen. Food had suffused into every nook and cranny, it was true; but none of it had carmelized. Stains disappeared with a single wipe. I was Mr. Clean, my soul was pure and my hands all-powerful. I put Beethoven on the stereo, those parts of his work that represent the mad blind energy of the universe: the *Grosse Fugue*, the second movment of the Ninth, the finale of the Seventh, and of the *Hammerklavier*. I was another manifestation of this mad blind energy, cleaning in a dance, propelled also by the complex and frenetic music of Charlie Parker, of Yes, "Salt Peanuts" and "Perpetual Change." And soon enough the kitchen gleamed like a factory display model. It would pass the inspection.

The other rooms offered feeble resistance. Dust, what was it to me now? "I am the mad blind energy of the universe, I vacuum under the beds!" Cleaning lint from the vacuum I sliced the very tip of my right forefinger off, and for a while it was hard not to get blood on the walls. But that was the most resistance these room could offer. Soon they shone with a burnished glow.

Now, inspired, I decided to get *really* thorough. It was time for details. I had been going to leave the floors alone, as they appeared clean enough to pass; but now with everything else so clean I noticed that there were little dark marks around the doorways, little dips in the grain of the wood where dirt had managed to insinuate itself. I bought some wood polish and went to work on the floors, and when I was done it was like walking on ice.

I dusted off the tops of the bookcases, up near the ceiling. I put spackle in the nail holes in the walls. When I was done the walls were all smooth, but it seemed to me that I could see a little discoloration where the spackle had gone. A few moments' pacing and inspiration struck: I got some typewriter white-out from our boxes, and used it as touch-up paint. It really worked well. Nicks in doorways, a place where the wall was scraped by a chair back; typewriter white-out, perfect.

In the evenings during this week of cleaning frenzy, I sat with friends, drinking and feeling my hands throb. One night I overheard by chance an Israeli friend tell a story about a Swiss friend of hers who had un-

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screwed the frames on her double-hung windows, to clean the inside surfaces. I shot up in my chair, mouth hanging open; I had noticed dust on the inner sides of our double-paned windows that very afternoon, and figured it was something I wouldn't be able to do anything about. It never would have occurred to me to unscrew the frames! But the Swiss know about these things. The next day I got out a screwdriver, and unscrewed and polished until my wrists were like cooked spaghetti. And the windows sparkled from all four surfaces. They would pass the inspection.

On the morning of Inspection Day I walked through the big rooms of the apartment, with their tan leather chairs and couches, and the white walls and bookcases, and the sun streamed in and I stood there transfixed as if in the dream of a cognac advertisement, in air like mineral water.

Glancing at the long mirror in the foyer something caught my eye; I frowned; I walked up to it, feeling uneasy as I often do around mirrors, and looked at it closely. Sure enough, some dust. I had forgotten to clean the mirror. As I went to work on it I marvelled: you can see the difference between a dusty mirror and a clean one, even when — staring at the paper towel in my hand — there is only enough dust to make a thin short line, like a faint pencil mark. So little dust, distributed over such a large surface — and yet we still can see it. The eye is that powerful. If we can see that, I thought, why not ourselves? Why not everything?

So I strode around the cognac advertisement in a state of rapture; until I remembered the sheets, down in the washing machine. All would have been well, if not for the sheets. All through the week I had been washing those sheets, downstairs in the basement. Red plastic laundry basket filled with linen: we had seven bottom sheets, seven pillow cases, seven big duvet cases. The duvets were fine, as white as cotton. But the bottom sheets, the pillow cases. . . . Well. They were yellowed. Stained. Alarming evidence of our bodies, our physical existence: oils, fluids, miniscule scraps of us rubbed into the cloth like butter, ineradicably.

Certainly, I thought, the Swiss must have methods for dealing with evidence as serious as this. So I had gone out and bought bleaches. Recalling the bleach ads from back home, I trustfully assumed that the stained linen would emerge from one trip through the wash gleaming like lightning. But it wasn't so. Wash after wash did nothing to change their color. I went out and bought a different kind of bleach, then another. Two powders, one liquid. I upped the doses on each of them. Nothing worked.

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And now it was the morning of Inspection Day, and I had recalled the sheets in the basement, and my rapture was shattered. I hurried down stairs, walked down the long concrete underground hallway to the laundry room. I saw that the building would stand for a thousand years. It would resist ten megatons. The washing machine was trilingual and as big as a truck. I brought it online, gave it its pre-run check-off for the final attempt, set my array of bleaches on top of the machine. It was the fourteenth time I had run things through this week, and I had the procedure streamlined; but this time I stopped to think. I looked at the three different kinds of bleach on top of the dryer, and I had an idea. I took the largest cap and turned it open end up, then poured in liquid bleach until the cup was half-full. Then I poured in some of both of the powders.

Synergy, right? Singing a little tune in praise of the mysterious force of synergy, I took the pencil from the sign-in book and stirred the mix in the cap vigorously. It began to bubble a little, then to foam.

Only at that point did I remember my wife, the chemist, yelling at me for mixing two cleansers together in an attempt to get a bathtub clean. "If you had mixed ammonia and Ajax it would have made chloramine gas and killed you!" she had said. "*Never* mix stuff like that together!"

I left the cap of bleaches on the dryer and ran out of the room. From the concrete hall I stared back in, sniffing carefully. Glancing down I noticed the pencil, still clenched in my hand; and the bottom half of it, the part that had stirred the bleaches, was as white as a stick of chalk. "Ho!" I exclaimed, and retreated farther up the hall. Synergy can be a powerful thing.

After some thought, and a closer inspection of the pencil, which now had a pure white eraser, I returned to the washroom. The air seemed okay. I was committed at this point, I had to meet the Swiss challenge. So I tipped the capful of bleaches carefully into the plastic opening on top of the washer, and I stuffed our yellowy bottom sheets and pillow cases inside, and I closed up the washer and punched the buttons for the hottest water available, ninety degrees centigrade. Walking back upstairs I noticed that the very tip of my left forefinger had a white patch on it. Back in the apartment I found it wouldn't wash off. "Bleached my flesh!" I exclaimed. "That stuff is finally working the way it's supposed to."

An hour later I returned to the washroom apprehensively, hoping that the sheets had not been eaten to shreds or the like. On the contrary; when

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I opened the washer door there was a glare as if several camera flashes had gone off right in my face, just like in the ads; and there were the sheets, as white as new snow.

I hooted for glee, and stuffed them in the dryer. And by the time the Inspector rang the bell below, they were dried and ironed and folded and neatly stacked in the linen drawers of the bedroom wardrobe, looking like great hunks of Ivory soap.

I hummed cheerfully as I let the inspector in. He was a young man, perhaps younger than myself. His English was excellent. He was apologetic, defensive; it was a boring task for both of us, he said, but necessary. No problem, I replied, and showed him around the place. He nodded, frowning slightly. "I must count the various items in the kitchen," he said, brandishing an inventory.

That took a long time. When he was done he shook his head disapprovingly. "There are four glasses missing, and one spoon, and the top off the tea kettle."

"That's right," I said happily. "We broke the glasses and lost the spoon, and I think we broke the tea kettle, though I can't remember." These things didn't matter, they didn't have to do with the essential challenge, which concerned not number but order; not quantity, but quality; not inventory, but cleanliness.

And the inspector understood this too; after listening to my admission, he shook his head seriously and said, "Fine, fine; however, what about *this*?" And with a satisfied look he reached up into the back of the top shelf of the broom closet, and held out before me a short stack of grimy kitchen towels.

In that moment I understood that the Inspector wanted dirtiness, in the same way that a policeman wants crime; it's the only thing that can make the job interesting. I stared at the kitchen towels, which I had completely forgotten. "What about them?" I said. "We never used those, I forgot they were up there." I shrugged. "The previous tenant must have done that to them."

He stared at me disbelievingly. "How did you dry your dishes?"

"We stand them in the drainer and let them dry on their own."

He shook his head, not believing that anyone would rely on such a method. I recalled the Swiss friend of ours who dried her bathtub with a towel after showering. I shrugged stubbornly; the Inspector shook his head

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stubbornly. He turned to look in the broom closet again, to see if there were any other forgotten treasures. Without forethought I quickly reached behind him and touched the stained kitchen towels with my bleached forefinger.

They turned white.

When the young inspector was done searching the broom closet, I said casually, "But they're not that bad, are they?" He looked at the kitchen towels and his eyebrows shot up. He regarded me suspiciously; I just shrugged innocently, and left the kitchen. "Are you about done?" I asked. "I have to go downtown."

He prepared to leave. "We will have to see about the missing glasses," he said, voice heavy with dissatisfaction.

"And the spoon," I said. "And the tea kettle top."

He left.

I danced through the sparkling air of the empty apartment. My work was done, I had passed the inspection, my soul was pure, I was in a state of grace. Weak sunlight lanced between low clouds, and out on the balcony the air was frigid. I put on my down jacket to go into the city center, to see my Zürich one last time.

Down the old overgrown steps and through the wintry garden of the ETH, past the big building housing the Chinese graduate students. Down the steep walkway to Voltastrasse, past the Japanese fire maple and the interior design store. I touched one red rose and was not particularly surprised to see it turn white. My whole fingertip looked like paraffin now.

Down at the Voltastrasse tram stop, in the wind. Across the street the haunted house stood, a pinkish wreck with big cracks in its walls; Lisa and I had always marvelled at it, there was nothing even remotely as derelict as it anywhere in Zürich. It was an anomaly, an exile like we were, and we loved it. "I'll never touch you," I said to it.

A Number Six tram hummed down the hill from Kirche Fluntern and squealed to a halt before me. You have to touch a button to get the doors to open, so I did so and the whole tram car turned white. Usually they are blue, but there are a few trams painted different colors to advertise the city museums, and there are some painted white to advertise the Oriental museum in Reitberg, so I assumed that this car would now be taken for one of those; and I climbed aboard.

We slid off down the hill toward Platte, ETH and Central. I sat in the

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back of the tram and watched the Swiss in front of me, getting on and off. Many of them were old. None of them ever sat in seats beside each other until all the seats had been filled by single parties. If single seats were vacated at a stop, people sitting next to strangers in double seats would get up and move to the single seat. No one talked, though they did look at each other a little. Mostly they looked out the windows. The windows were clean. These trams on the number six line had been built in 1952, but they were still in factory perfect condition; they had passed the inspection.

Looking down, I suddenly noticed that each pair of shoes on the tram was flawless. Then I noticed that each head of hair was perfectly coiffed. Even the two punks on the tram had their hair perfectly done, in their own style. Shoes and hair, I thought, these will reveal the wealth of a nation. These extremes reveal the soul.

At the ETH stop a Latin American man got on the tram. He was dressed in a colorful serape, and thin black cotton pants, and he looked miserably cold. He was carrying an odd thing that looked like a bow; it was painted crudely, in many colors, and there was a small painted gourd attached to it, where you would hold the bow if it were meant to shoot arrows. The man had long lanky black hair that fell loosely over his shoulders and down the back of the serape, and his face was big and broad-cheeked; he looked like a *mestizo*, or perhaps a purebred Indian from Bolivia or Peru or Ecuador. There were quite a few of them living in Zürich. Lisa and I often saw groups of them on Bahnhofstrasse, playing music for change. Pan pipes, guitars, drums, gourds filled with beans: street music performed right through the winter, with the players and audience alike shivering in the snowy air.

When the tram started to move again, this Latino walked to the front of the car and turned around to face us all. He said something loudly in Spanish, and then began to play the bow and gourd instrument, plucking it rapidly. Moving one thumb up and down the metal bowstring changed the pitch of the sound, which reverberated in the gourd, making a kind of loud twang. The resulting sound was awful: loud, unmelodic, impossible to ignore.

The Swiss stared resentfully at this intrusion. This was not done; I had never seen it before, and neither had the others aboard, it was clear. And the sound of the primitive instrument was so insistent, so weird. The

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disapproval in the car was as palpable as the sound, the two vibrations battling each other in tense air.

The tram stopped at Haldenegg, and several people got off, more than would usually; clearly some were just escaping the musician, and would get on the next tram to come along. Newcomers, unpleasantly surprised, stared at the man as he twanged away. The tram doors closed and we moved off again, down the hill to Central. The captive audience stared at the musician, as belligerent as cows eyeing a passing car.

Then he broke into song. It was one of those Bolivian or Peruvian hill ballads, a sad tale dramatically told, and the man sang it over the twanging of his absurd instrument in a hoarse wild voice, expressing all the anguish of the exile, lost in a cold land. What a voice the man had! Suddenly the ridiculous twanging made sense, it all fell together; this voice in a foreign language cut through all the barriers and spoke to us, to each and every person on the tram. That kind of singing is impossible to ignore or deny — we knew exactly what he was feeling, and so for that moment we were a little community. And all without understanding a word. What power the voice has to express what really matters! People shifted in their seats, they sat up, they watched the singer intently, they smiled. When he walked up and down the tram, holding out a black felt hat, they dug deep into their pockets and purses and dropped change in, smiling at him and saying things in Swiss German, or even in High German so he might perhaps understand. When the doors hissed open at Central, they were surprised; no one aboard had noticed our arrival.

The Swiss! I had to laugh. So closed in, so generous. . . .

Then as each person touched the white parts of my white tram, they went white themselves. Chairback or railing or overhead support; it didn't matter; they touched the tram and left it as white as porcelain figures of themselves. And no one at Central paid any attention.

As we left the tram together, I touched the musician on the shoulder, in a sort of greeting, or an experiment. He only looked at me, eyes black as obsidian; and it seemed to me that the vivid colored thread sewn riotously in his serape actually grew more brilliant, more intensely colorful: little rainbow crosshatchings, scarlet and saffron and green and violet and pink and sky blue, glowing in crude brown woolen cloth. Without a glance back, the musician walked off into the Niederdorf, Zürich's medieval town.

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I crossed the bridge looking down at the white swans in the gray Limmat, feeling the wind rush through me, buoyant with the memory of his music and my apartment's purity. I walked down Bahnhofstrasse seeing it all again, seeing it fully for the first time in a long while and the last time in who knew how long, perhaps forever, and my heart filled and I said, "Ah handsome Zūri my town, my town, I too am one of your exile sons," and I caressed the granite blocks of the stolid elegant buildings and they turned white as wedding cakes under my hand, with a keening sound like violins played backward. When would I ever see it again like this, with its low pearl gray sky rushing overhead in the cold wind, with the Alps at the end of the Zürichsee standing up like cardboard cut-out mountains, steeper than mountains could ever be? I touched the tram tracks and they turned to white gold, in a wide street of glazed sugar. And I walked down this white street looking in the sparkling window displays of the rich merchants, the jewelry and clothing and watches all perfect and gleaming, and, as I traced my fingers over the window glass, as white as white opals.

In among the narrow alleyways of the medieval town I wandered, touching every massive building until it seemed I walked in a silent world of milk and baking soda, saying good-bye with every touch. To consciously be doing something you loved, for the last time! Past St. Peter's church which was already alabaster before I touched it, past Fraumünster and across the river to Grossmünster with its painfully spare interior, like a tall empty warehouse made entirely of white marble.... Then back across the river again, on a paper bridge. And looking down the gray Limmat I saw that much of Zürich had turned white, bleached by my touch.

I came to the lakefront at Burkliplatz, touched the steps and suddenly the fine little park and the boat docks gleamed like soap carvings. The beautiful statue of Ganymede and the eagle looked like they had been molded out of white ceramic, and in Ganymede's outstretched arms it seemed to me a whole world was being embraced, a rushing world of gray sky and gray water where everything passed by so fast that you never got the chance to hold it, to touch it, to make it yours. Can't we keep anything? These years of our life, we were happy, we were here, and now it was all white and clean and still, turning to marble under the touch of my hand. So that in the pure rapture of final things I walked down the white concrete ramp to the lapping lake water and crouched down and touched

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it; and before me I saw the whole lake go still and turn white, as if it were an immense tub of white chocolate; and in the distance the magnificent Alps were white; and overhead the rushing clouds pulsed white and glowed like spun glass. I turned around and saw that the city's transformation was complete: it was a still and silent Zürich of snow and white marble, white chocolate, white ceramic, milk, salt, cream.

But from a distant street I could still hear that twanging.

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Did you ever wonder why, in every rural community, there is at least one property where every last inch of empty space is filled with old junk cars and old bedsprings and pieces of tractors? Here is one far-out answer.

What the EPA Don't Know Won't Hurt Them

By Suzette Haden Elgin

WHILE JOHNNY BEAU and Delmer were buying the '61 Chevy pickup from the man that ran the Stop & Dump junkyard, they were well aware of how funny he thought it all was, and how stupid he thought *they* were. Dumb, ignorant hillbillies, he was thinking, buying a pickup truck that had been worth maybe fifty bucks *before* the train hit it broadside and dragged it three miles! Dumb, ignorant hillbillies, he'd been thinking, and illiterate on top of that! He'd been fairly jumping up and down, scarcely able to contain himself, dying to get on downtown and tell everybody the tale of the two big, dumb country boys that'd come by his business that morning and downright *begged* him to fleece them.

Johnny Beau and Delmer knew all about that. They were used to it.

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They ignored him. They ignored the look on his face — a look you could spread on toast — with the patience that comes of long practice. And they gave him the hundred he asked for, and ten bucks more to use his rig to hoist the mangled metal up onto their flatbed where they could haul it on home, although by rights he ought to of done that for free. People like him — they hardly ever learned. And worrying about their foolishness was a waste of valuable time.

They hauled the truck on home and called Granny Motley outside to take a look at it. "You see, Granny?" Johnny Beau said. "You see how that lies?"

"It's got an interesting shape to it, Johnny Beau," she answered, and she gave him a sharp look over the top of her glasses. "You think it's interesting enough to call me out here in the street to admire it?"

"Granny," Johnny Beau said solemnly, "what if Lee Wommack would just move one of those junk cars in his yard *over* a couple of feet — that red Rambler that he's got lying up against the garage? If he'd just move that one over and lay this piece beside it, aimed toward town? You take a good look now, and see if you don't agree with me!"

The old woman went over to the truck and poked at the pickup with one crookedy finger, and said hmmmmmmph. She walked around to the other side and poked it again, and said hmmmph some more. And then she backed way off and climbed up onto a fence to get a better look at what she'd been poking, and she began nodding her head.

"Ah yes," she said. "I see, boys. I do see. And I do believe you're right."

"Granny," Delmer offered, "you realize that's damned near the last piece we need?" It made him feel strange, saying that. When something has been more than a hundred years in the building, the idea that it's just about *finished* doesn't lie easy in the mind.

"Yes," she said. "I can see that it is."

"And you'll tell Mr. Wommack?"

Granny nodded. "I'll speak to Lee Wommack," she said. "Be happy to. However — there's something that's got to be done first."

Johnny Beau and Delmer sighed; they were used to that, too. There was always something else to be done, any day you had to bring the Granny into a matter. They'd been expecting it. They said only, "Yes, ma'am, Granny," and looked attentive.

"It's the right shape," she told them. "Just *exactly* the right shape. But

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it's mightily ugly, you know. It's full of ugly and running over with it."

"Well...." Delmer jammed his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans. "There was a couple of people inside when the train hit it."

"Uh-huh. And a little child?"

"Might could be."

"You didn't ask?"

"No, ma'am."

"Next time, ask."

"Yes, ma'am," said Delmer.

"People inside!" Granny Motley frowned, and laid two fingers over her lips while she thought that over. "Very likely they had time to see that train coming at them," she said slowly, with a faraway look in her eyes that made Delmer uncomfortable. "Trying to get that truck off the tracks where they'd stalled it, scared too foolish to leave the truck and run. Very likely they had time, just before the train hit them, to think about what it was going to be like riding on its nose down the tracks, nothing between them and it but the clothes they had on."

"Very likely," Johnny Beau agreed, glad he couldn't see whatever she was seeing.

"Awful!" said the Granny. And then she dropped it, and turned her attention to them. "*So!*" she said briskly. "You two boys, you take that truck on down to the creek, and you put it out in the running water there by the big sycamore."

"For how long, Granny?" Delmer asked.

"Thirty days, for starters," she said. "And then I'll go look at it to see how matters stand.... Could be that'll do it. Thirty days at least, to purify it and clear out the violence." She folded her arms over her chest and stared hard at Johnny Beau and Delmer. "I could be a good deal more *precise*," she said crossly, "if you two had bothered to find out the circumstances."

They agreed, and they apologized. She was right: they should have thought of it. The way things were moving along now, people needed to be able to start making plans. And then Johnny Beau said, "Granny, Miz Bridges over there is gonna have a *cat* fit when she sees us put this in the creek."

"It's our creek," said the Granny gently.

"All the same."

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"Well, let it pass, Johnny Beau. If she comes out and starts in on you, just you yes-ma'am her and tell her it was me that ordered it done, and let her come up and talk to me about it if she likes. And mind you, don't sass her, or look smart-aleck, or even *think* smart-aleck. She's a good woman in her way, for a city woman, and it's not her fault she's ignorant. You mind your manners with her."

"She may not come down," Delmer observed. "I think she's gotten real discouraged about it all."

DELMER WAS right: Hannah Bridges did not go down to the creekbank and confront them. As he'd said, she'd been through so many useless wrangles on this subject that she'd about given up hope. And Harry had told her last time to keep *still*. "These people are my customers, Hannah!" he'd scolded her. "How do you expect me to sell groceries to people if you spend half your time chewing them out?"

"Harry," she said, "I'm sorry. But it's just *disgusting!* Have you seen that Lee Wommack's yard lately? Harry, you can't tell me there's any excuse for somebody filling up every last inch of empty space around his house with old junk cars, and old washing machines, and old bedsprings, and pieces of tractors, and —"

"Just stop, Hannah." He'd cut her off sharply, and that wasn't like Harry, who was as polite a man as she had ever known. "Just let it be," he said.

"But Harry, don't you think that —"

And he'd cut her off again! "Hannah, if you want to *eat* this year, you'll let it *be!*" he'd said angrily. "You say anything you like to me, here in this house, and I'll listen. I'll even agree with you. But you've got to quit lecturing people about what they do with their own property on their own land!"

And he'd gone off to the store, slamming the back door behind him as he went, and left her standing there astonished. It was clear to her that he really meant it; she didn't remember Harry ever slamming a door before in all their years together, not even when he'd had good reason.

Remembering that now, she stood at her window peering out as the two young men went about their dreadful task. Watching while the pretty view of the swift, clear water and the grassy banks and the sycamore tree was destroyed by the addition of a twisted pile of black and rusty scrap

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metal! It had been a car or a truck, she guessed. And they were leaving it there, dumping it, right in the middle of the creek. It made her sick. Only the fact that she loved Harry, and the memory of the way he had slammed the door, kept her from going down and attacking the two Motleys with a garden rake, or anything else she could put her hands on quickly that might damage them. What kind of lunatic would dump a wrecked truck in the middle of a beautiful little creek and turn it into an eyesore like that? What kind of Ozark madness did it *take* to think up such obscenities and carry them out, in broad daylight, in front of God and everybody?

"Animals!" Hannah shrieked from behind the glass, not caring that they couldn't hear her. It made her feel better, whether they heard her or not. "You *animals!*"

It made no difference to them, of course. Both of them had backed away from the creek's edge, with their silly baseball caps pulled down over their eyes, and were squinting at the scene. She supposed they would go on standing there until they were satisfied that it was ugly enough to meet their standards.

Hannah said a word she doubted her own mother had even known existed, tears of rage and frustration pouring down her cheeks, and drew the curtains to shut over the window. She had no desire to look out that window again. When Harry came home that night, she would tell him that it was time he closed the grocery store and went into the feed business, because it was *animals* he was feeding. Beasts!

The thirty days went by, and three more after Granny Motley inspected the wreck, and two more days on top of that. And then, to Hannah's mystified delight, the truck was removed from the creek and taken off to be added to Mr. Wommack's impromptu junkyard, so that she got her pretty view back.

Johnny Beau went to the Granny then, looking — and feeling — very serious.

"Granny," he said, "Mr. Wommack tells me — and there's several as backs him up, now! — that the grid's finished except for just one single piece. Is that true?" He knew his voice was shaking like a child's; in front of Granny Motley, he didn't care about that. He *was* that scared, anyway. Sure, he wanted the grid to be finished! He'd been wanting that from the minute he'd been old enough for the grown-ups to explain to him what it

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was and what it was for. But it was scary all the same. This life he had was the only life he knew.

She nodded yes, but she didn't look as happy as he'd expected she would, and that was scary, too. "Yes, it's true," she said. "It's really true."

"Well!" Johnny Beau smacked his thigh with one strong palm. "Then let's get the last piece, for God's sake, and *do* 'er!"

Granny Motley cleared her throat.

"Come on, Granny," he said urgently, "tell me what it looks like, and I'll go find it, if I have to hit every junkyard and ditch dump and sinkhole from here to Little Rock! Come on!"

Her lips thinned, and she got That Look, but she made no objection. Just started describing the missing piece to him, like he'd asked her to.

It went on and on, while he fidgeted, and the time came when he risked interrupting her.

"Dammit, Granny!" he protested. "How am I supposed to keep all that in my head?"

"I keep it all in *mine*," she pointed out.

"Well, I can't do it. Can you draw it for me?"

Granny Motley made an exasperated noise.

"Granny," he insisted, "it's important. Don't be onery at me."

"You're a lot of trouble, Johnny Beau," she said.

"There's a lot at stake," he told her. "I do the best I can."

"You serious?"

"Yes, ma'am. Dead serious."

"Wait a minute, then."

And she reached into her pocket and pulled out a crochet hook and a hank of brown yarn. "You watch," she said. "I can't draw the fool thing, but I can crochet it." And her fingers went flying, while he waited.

"There," she said finally. "That's it. That's how the last piece would look."

She held it out to him, and he took it and turned it over and over in his hands, marveling.

"Granny," he said slowly, "there isn't anything in this blessed *world* that looks like that!"

"Maybe not before," she said. "But now there is. And you're holding it."

"But it's got to be metal. And glass. Stuff like that."

"Yes."

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"Well, there *isn't* anything like this made of metal and glass and wire, Granny. I've been looking since I was just a little ol' kid, day and night. I never go *any*where that I don't keep my eye peeled, all the time, just in case I'll see a piece that goes to the grid. And I know there's no piece like that one to be had."

"You've done well, Johnny Beau," she said.

"It's taken me all my life."

"All twenty years of it."

"That's all the life I've got, so far," he said stubbornly. "And I've mostly spent it working on that grid. When everybody else was out having fun, lots and lots of times, I've been looking for the pieces. You know that."

"I do. You're a good boy, Johnny Beau."

"And now you show me *this* monstrosity, and tell me we're stuck here till I find *it* someplace!"

"Well," she said, "I'm telling you the plain truth."

She reached over with one skinny hand and patted the piece of crochet work he was holding. "Stretched out flat," she said, "it would be thirteen inches long. And it's got seven turns to it — that have all got seven turns to *them*. And some of those . . . well, you see the way of it, Johnny."

"Lord!"

The old woman chuckled, and that annoyed him.

"I can't find it," he said, "and I know that. I could look my whole life long and never find it. But I can *make* it. That would be just as good, wouldn't it?"

"It's been tried," she said. "Many and many a time. There's lots of us knew this piece was going to be hard to come by, and lots that tried to make it, against the day it would be all there was left to find."

"And?"

"And it never works, because it has all the wrong thoughts with it, every time. People get mad, trying to get it right, and then it's spoiled."

"I won't get mad," he declared.

The Granny just smiled, and told him to go on about his business and let her get on with hers. And he went off muttering to himself, the crocheted thing clutched in his right hand, where he wouldn't lose it, to give it a try.

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* * *

JOHNNY BEAU was good with his hands and good with tools. He knew metal, and he knew shaping. He went at the task with his mind clear and calm, determined to stay that way. But it was just like Granny Motley had told him. There was something about the piece that was fiendish, something he just couldn't seem to get right no matter how careful he was and no matter how slow he worked and no matter how hard he tried. And just like she'd told him, the longer he worked at it, the more often he lost his temper. Till the afternoon came when he flung his latest try right through the shop window, and it cost him forty-seven dollars to fix, and he still was no closer than he'd been when he started.

He felt the burdens of the world on his shoulders then, and he felt plain desperate not to be man enough to do this one small thing to ease those burdens, and he needed somebody to take all that out on. He went back to Granny Motley, that being the safest course and the most likely to lead to a solution, and he spoke to her in honest, baffled anger.

"You women!" he shouted at her, never mind that she was nearly ninety years old and owed *great* respect. "You know a whole lot more than you'll tell! You could help, but you *don't*, for pure meanness and spite! You *enjoy* it — don't think I don't know that! *All* of you, you get a *kick* out of watching us men flounder around trying to get things done with only half the facts we need! Damn the *lot* of you!"

He'd thought she might hit him, or kick him, or bite him. He was surely asking for it, and in her place that's what he no doubt would of done. He didn't care. He was that mad. It would of made him feel better if she *had* hit him. But she just sat and watched him with a patient look on her face, listening to him rant and rave, until he wore himself out.

And then she reminded him of the time when he was maybe eight or nine years old, and he'd accused her — and "you women," talking just like he was talking now — of being able to make it rain. "Remember, Johnny Beau Motley, what I told you that time?"

"Yeah, I remember," he said sullenly. "You said you don't make it rain; you *let* it rain."

"I did," she agreed. "And that was true. And we have told you men about it once for every star that shines, Johnny Beau. To no avail *what*soever."

"Damn you all," he said again wearily. "Every one of you."

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Granny Motley clucked her tongue at him and said, "See there? You can't *force* things, Johnny Beau! That's never going to get you anywhere. And that holds for women as much as it holds for weather."

His jaw hurt him, and his pride hurt him worse, and he glared at her while she looked right back, steady on, and finally he dropped his eyes and sighed heavily.

"All right, Granny," he said. "I guess you make your point. And after I get over my damn temper, I'll be coming back to apologize. But not right now."

"No. Right now wouldn't be a good choice for it. Right now you'd still be into cussing me out."

"You and all the rest of the women! It's not just you, Granny."

She smiled at him and patted his clenched right fist, and he turned on his heel and left. Johnny Beau lived for the day she would be *wrong* for once.

He'd meant to go to the woods and walk off his mad, and then go into town and maybe get some chocolate candy for Granny, who was partial to the kind with the orange jelly centers. But the sight of Hannah Bridges stopped him short on the front steps. She was very nearly *running* up the stone path to Granny Motley's house, waving her arms, with her hair falling down and blowing every which way, and she looked to be delighted with herself. What it was the women knew, Johnny Beau thought, they'd forgotten to tell Hannah Bridges.

"You there!" she called to him. "You, Johnny Motley!"

"Yes, ma'am, Miz Bridges," he said, and waited.

"You see this?" She shook her hand in front of him and whatever it was that dangled from it.

"Ma'am?"

"You see this?" she demanded again. "You see that child down there by the road?"

Johnny Beau looked past her, and saw his second cousin Amanda down there, making mud pies where the last rain had left her a handy puddle. "You mean, Amanda?" he asked.

"I do indeed!"

"What's she done?" he asked politely. "If she broke something of yours, Miz Bridges, Amanda's daddy will fix it or get you a new one."

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"She didn't break anything, John, but it's a wonder she doesn't have tetanus this minute! *This* is what comes of stringing *junk* all over the county, John! Little children, who don't know any better and can't protect themselves, end up playing with dangerous pieces of that junk like *this* piece! Don't you people know tetanus can *kill a child!*"

Johnny yearned to tell her everything he knew about lockjaw, in intricate detail, but he deferred to Granny Motley; don't sass the woman, and don't hold her ignorance against her. "Yes, ma'am," he said instead, and took a good look at the thing she was waving.

And his heart nearly stopped.

Please God, he thought, don't let her mash it or twist it or break anything off it! Gently, carefully, so as not to make her suspicious or alarm her in any way, he held out his hand.

"Here, Miz Bridges," he said in his best church voice. "You let me have that, and I'll put it away somewhere where none of the kids can get hurt on it; I promise." And he added, "Careful you don't cut yourself, ma'am. That's a wicked-looking thing!"

It was. Stretched out flat, it would have been thirteen inches long. It had seven turns in it, and each of them had seven turns of its own. And there was a good deal more to it, all of it promising. He could have wept, he was so scared the city woman would damage it somehow.

Only after he had it safely in his own hand did his heart settle down again. Behind him in the house, he could hear the Granny calling, demanding to know what in the world was going on on her front *porch*, for heaven's sakes, and he called back to reassure her.

"I'll be there in just a minute, Granny!" he yelled. "And I've got something to show you!" And then he stood there patiently yes-ma'aming a good five minutes more while Hannah Bridges told him what a disgrace it was the way Ozarkers left sharp, rusty metal around where innocent children could get hurt on it — and he tolerated her in silence and did *not* interrupt to tell her that Ozark children were taught not to play anywhere that there was sharp, rusty metal, and had sense enough to do as they were told, while city children went roaming the streets looking for soft white drugs to play with. Warming to her subject, she explained to him how he was going to rue the day one of these days, and how it was just plain blind luck that Amanda wasn't in an emergency room this very minute. And eventually she did run down.

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"Thank you, Miz Bridges," he said when that happened, feeling he'd stood there a week.

"You're very welcome, I'm *sure!*" she said, and went stalking off across the street to her own house, rubbing her hands together as if she'd accomplished a good deal.

Except, halfway down the walk, she turned and looked back at him. "One more thing!" she called to him.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"If you *must* leave junk lying around on your property, you could at *least* keep the ground cleaned off all *around* it, so that it wouldn't be a haven for *snakes!* Children die of snakebite, too, you know!"

He smiled at her politely. "Yes, ma'am," he said. He did not tell her that you *had* to let vines and brush grow up around the junk, and warn the children away from it. You had no choice about that. Because somebody looking down from high enough up and seeing the grid of junk forming on Earth might very well have recognized it for what it was . . . would *certainly* have recognized it for a made thing, with a purpose. And that might have been more dangerous than snakes and lockjaw put together. "Thank you, Miz Bridges," he said instead. "Appreciate your trouble."

Not until she was safely inside, and her door closed, did he let out a whoop of joy and charge into the house bellowing, "Granny, you are never going to BELIEVE what I've got here!"

The headlines the next day were no comfort to Hannah Bridges, who kept saying,"But I was just *talking* to one of them, only *yes*terday? It's not *poss*ible!"

Possible or not, there it was. "Twelve Arkansas families disappear from the face of the Earth overnight!" the newspapers screamed, using the biggest type they had available. "FBI estimates a thousand gone without a trace! Authorities baffled!" "Administration suspects terrorists!"

They *were* gone, and much of their belongings with them. All their houses and outbuildings were swept and tidy and still. On every kitchen table lay a neat stack of envelopes with bills inside, and checks or cash in each one to cover the obligation. Even the junk piled in the yards and ditches and ravines was tidy; the vegetation around it seemed to have all been burned away by the kind of fire that burns so hot it leaves not even ashes behind, though not a single fire had been reported. The junk itself

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looking burnished and shiny and sparkling, with no sign of the rust and filth that had been there the day before. But nobody had seen the Ozarkers leaving the hills. Nobody had seen them drive away, or get on a bus, or board a plane. Nobody'd sold them gas; nobody'd sold them tickets. Not one of them had given notices at the places where they worked, or offered any other warning. They were just GONE. As if they'd never been there at all.

In the belly of The Ship, grown-ups were rocking children who were little enough to be crying about things left behind now that the distracting excitement of the launch was over. Earthlight and starlight mingled were streaming in through the windows. The men were looking out at the immensity around them, half-uneasy that they didn't really understand how it had been done, much less what the women were doing now to keep it all going — and half-grateful that they didn't have to know the details. They were reasonably certain they wouldn't have found those details reassuring. And still — in spite of the tension they all felt — when Johnny Beau pointed out how happy the city people were going to be now, the laughter went round low and easy. He was always a help, that Johnny Beau.

Planetside, Hannah Bridges tried to speak calmly. "Harry," she said, "I *understand* that even the government doesn't know where they went, or why, or whether they'll ever be back. I *understand* that. It scares me to death, but I've accepted it."

"That's my girl," said Harry fondly.

"And I must say, I wish I'd been nicer to them.... I wish I didn't have to think they'll never know I didn't mean to be so harsh."

"Try not to think about it, Hannah," he said. "It won't change anything."

"Harry, do *you* have any idea how it could have happened?"

"No, Hannah, I don't."

"You don't suppose they were *kidnapped*.... You don't suppose they were taken away against their *will*?"

"By somebody considerate enough to let them pay all their bills first? I don't think so, darling."

Hannah whimpered a little bit, startling herself, and coughed to cover the childish sound of it.

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"It's all right, Hannah," Harry said to her, understanding. "I'm just as scared as you are."

"You're scared, too?"

"Sure I'm scared. Who wouldn't be?"

She went into his arms, glad to have them strong and gentle around her, glad she didn't have to pretend a serenity she didn't feel. And with her face buried against his chest, she said, "Harry?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"There is *one* good thing that's come out of all of this," she said, trying to sound casual, not wanting to sound as if she were unaware of the tragedy of it all.

"And what is that, Hannah?"

"Well, Harry," she said, and, in spite of herself, she smiled in the soft, warm darkness of his embrace, "*finally* we can get rid of all that JUNK!"

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FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 39: *In Which We Hum a Merry Tune While Waiting for New Horrors, New Horrors*

WITHIN A VERY few days of my sitting down to write this installment, as November draws toward Thanksgiving, your ever-faithful columnist will be seeing the Whitley Streiber-scripted, Philippe Mora-directed adaptation of Streiber's *Communion* (the press release vouches that this is the "film based on the true story by Whitley Streiber" in which Mr. Streiber assures us that he was spirited away by aliens who stuck his head full of needles, for real, honest to goodness), starring Frances Sternhagen and Christopher Walken; and Rockne O'Bannon's *Fear*. (You all certainly remember Mr. O'Bannon, who wrote *Alien Nation*, on which I did rather a longish essay; and I promised that we'd take a long look at Mr. O'Bannon's virgin outing as scenarist-director. That look, in detail, nears.)

But that's within a few days, and deadline is fangfully upon me.

At the moment, like mariners becalmed in the Horse Latitudes, we have arrived at a point of no activity, and so I will take this opportunity to offer you what is commonly referred to as a "fill-in," a sort of marking time with which I can clean up some matters I think you'll find merrily enriching, intended to solve your gift-giving problems as the Channukah/Christmas season bays at your heels. Or better yet, suggestions for post-holiday wonders for which you can trade in the crap you received.

As I've noted in other installments, though this series of essays is principally concerned with motion pictures, I have taken it upon myself to extend the definition of "visual concern" to include matters that are usually beyond the scope of our resident book critics.

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I can, however, suggest that you not miss Ron Shelton's new film, "BLAZE" (Touchstone), A DRY WHITE SEASON (MGM-UA) GLORY (Tri-Star) and THE FABULOUS BAKER BOYS (20th Century Fox) until I can get back to you with your usual fix of observations on films fantastical.

Among the 65-to-75,000 books in my home, there are a great many small press publications. Limited edition titles that were either too esoteric or too marginally profitable for the commercial houses to attempt. Over the years in fantasy and sf, the cutting edge of artistic endeavor in these (and allied) genres has been honed as often by the courageous (or obsessed) cottage industry aficionado as it has by the megalopolitan publishers. Donald M. Grant and his punctiliously loving editions of Howard's Conan stories, elegantly bound and in traycases. Bill Crawford of FPCI, who first published Cordwainer Smith's "Scanners Live in Vain" in *Fantasy Book* in 1950, bringing that most extraordinary talent to the attention of Fred Pohl, who reprinted the story in a mass market Permabooks anthology two years later. Had Crawford not plucked "Scanners" from a slush pile and showcased it, Pohl might not have been piqued with curiosity, might not have pierced the mystery of "Smith's" true identity, might not have solicited new work for *Galaxy*, and we certainly would not have been enriched by all the Cordwainer Smith classics that followed. Lloyd Eshbach and his fondly-remembered Fantasy Press, committed to the preservation of the best of "Doc" Smith, John Campbell, A.E. van Vogt, Jack Williamson, and so many others. Ever-youthful Lloyd, who published the very first book of symposium essays about modern sf, OF WORLDS BEYOND, and rescued from oblivion the marvelous 1919 dystopian novel THE HEADS OF CERBERUS by Francis Stevens under the short-lived Polaris Press imprint. Shasta and Gnome Press; Carcosa and Arkham House; Paul Ganley's quietly productive operation that most recently gave us a fine collection of Jessica Amanda Salmonson's stories; the breathless prolificity and stunning high quality of the Pulphouse Publishing axis; Ursus Imprints and the late Nemo Press; Kerosina and Morrigan in the U.K. (who else would bring into print so much splendid Keith Roberts material, or risk everything publishing the wonderfully loony ALLIGATOR ALLEY?); Scream/Press and Dark Harvest; Stu Schiff's Whispers Press that took the lead with horror fiction now emulated by every mainstream house; Borgo Press

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and Chris Drumm's booklets; the amazing Alex Berman and his ceaselessly collectible Phantasia editions; Underwood-Miller (who bring you HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING) and their collected Philip K. Dick set; Hadley and Mirage and Prime Press and the tiny Avalon — not the *other* Avalon — Cheap Street and Footsteps Press . . . and hundreds of others that escaped my notice and the cigar box full of old memories I call a mind, for which omissions I plead exhaustion and limited space and the plethora of small operations that have come and gone through the years.

There isn't enough praise in the world to thank all these men and women: lovers of the fiction, fans in the noblest sense of that word fallen on infamous times; bibliophiles and historians; rescuers of the damned and overlooked; preservers of treasured incunabula from their teen reading; purveyors of lovely packages containing the writings of authors we would surely lose were it not for the underappreciated, possibly demented, labors of the limited edition and small press heroes.

And here, at hand, is surely the most beautiful limited edition in years. . . .

The limited edition of Tim Powers's brilliant novel THE STRESS OF HER REGARD is the initial offering of a new small press called Charnel House, the obsession of a gentleman named Joe Stefko (who, apart from being — in the noblest way — an aficionado of the genre imaginative, is the drummer for The Turtles). The 544 page novel comes in two sumptuous Charnel House incarnations. The five hundred copy numbered edition goes for $125. There are twenty-six lettered copies, and they were produced for about $400 net. Don't try to find the latter edition, they're all gone; and if you can track a dealer who has one for sale, you'll discover s/he is asking between $600-$800.

Why, then, do I commend an item that is clearly not something you'll find in the racks at a Crown or Waldenbooks?

Because this is something to see, this Stefko-created book of books. The signed limitation sheet is made of African Maple, hand cut into veneer in Belgium. The text has been printed on seventy pound Mohawk Superfine. The endpapers are drawings by Mr. Powers, and there are a dozen vigorous Powers illustrations spaced throughout the body of the book. The numbered copies have been bound and slipcased in fourteen ounce, hand-streaked denim (which was stone dyed by Mr. Stefko in his bathtub and at a local laundromat). The lettered copies have been handbound

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in full Morocco Oasis Niger leather.

This was a wonderful book to read, but it is also an object of bibliophilic reverence by someone who understands just how important and treasurable books can be. This isn't a gift to give just anyone. It is for someone very very special.

And if you can obtain a copy, jump at the chance.

Try this address: Charnel House, PO Box 633, Lynbrook, New York 11563. Tell Mr. Stefko that Harlan sent you.

I'll make book that you'll thank me, the few of you who will happily sell your spouse or the family manse to snag one of these astonishingly memorable volumes.

Bruce Hamilton and Russ Cochran, the guiding intelligences behind a remarkable publishing *apparat* called Another Rainbow, have given us, over the years, definitive editions of cartoon treasures such as The Little Lulu Library, UNCLE SCROOGE IN COLOR, the Carl Barks Library (in nine exquisite volumes of Donald Duck art by "the Duck Man" of legend), and the complete EC comics series in handsome boxed sets. But now, they have outdone themselves, have bettered their best, have whipped a W!O!W! on us.

Another Rainbow has recently published the coffee table book no one can resist: MICKEY MOUSE IN COLOR. 250 giant pages (12½" x 16½" featuring eight complete, unedited daily and Sunday newspaper adventures of The Mouse by Floyd Gottfredson from the 1930s. In celebration of Mickey's 60th birthday only 3100 copies of this special limited edition have been produced. (A smaller trade edition has been produced for Pantheon Books of New York, but only in this Brobdingnagian manifestation are the strips reproduced full-size as they appeared in daily and Sunday papers of the Thirties. And if you need further mark of the added-value attendant on the limited over the trade, Bruce and Russ point out in a prefatory note that the limited weighs in at nine pounds, the trade an anorexic two-and-a-half.)

You have never seen coruscating color of this brilliance, not even in the finest Swiss-printed art books. Quoting Bruce and Russ again: "... no expense was spared to recreate color — or to imbue art that was originally printed only in black and white with new color. Some sections of this limited edition were printed with an extra color or a 'hit' of varnish to achieve a rare effect. The black and white photos were run in duotone, to heighten contrast and to give the pictures a new dimension."

Even expecting the producers of

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a product to hype what they're hawking, let me assure you the foregoing is understatement.

If you are an animated movie freak, if you are a Mickey enthusiast, or if you simply understand the literary icon that The Mouse has become for the world, this is the gift (for yourself or a Significant Other) to end all gifts. But wait! There's *more*!

This most excellent edition is, apart from gorgeous just gorgeous, filled with additional marzipan and *rahat lokoum*: a bound-in parchment limitation sheet bearing the autographs of Barks and Gottfredson, who died in 1986; an "in-depth look at 60 years of The Mouse"; an interview with Gottfredson by Disney Archivist David Smith; the text of a joint four-hour interview with the Duck Man and the Mouse Matisse; exhaustive and trivia-filled introductions and forewords; dozens of rare photos and cels; *and* (sound of sackbut, lyre and dulcimer) bound into all copies of this deluxe edition is a 7-inch picture record, numbered to match each book, featuring a portion of the Gottfredson/Barks interview, in which they discuss their favorite stories. Which list of lagniappe only begins to summarize the special features.

The book is not, of course, cheap. It is two hundred and fifty bucks. That's $250, plus $20 postage for regular mail (from Another Rainbow/Gladstone; Box 2079; Prescott, Arizona 86302). And if you have that kind of money, worth every sou of the tariff. But here's the clinker in your snowdrift: there are less than two hundred of the numbered copies left. If what I have babbled about here lights your fire, I suggest you use the phone to order one before extinction. They take credit cards. Call (602) 776-1300 and beg for the opportunity to take out a second mortgage to obtain a copy of this extravagantly-producedand absolutely whimsically wonderful publishing event.

It's your childhood dream realized.

You're going to *love* me for telling you about this one.

First, let me name-drop: Feliks Topolski, David Levine, Al Hirschfeld, Hank Hinton, Thomas Nast, Walt Kelly, Boris Artzybasheff, Ronald Searle, Pat Oliphant, Herblock, Edward Sorel. (Not to mention the deadly trio Mulatier, Rikord & Morchoisne.) If those names mean nothing to you, pass along to the next item. You are culturally deprived and the fine visual art of caricature is a vast echoing emptiness in your education.

But for those of you to whose eyes has come a twinkle at the mere mention of that pantheon, add the

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name Tullio Pericoli.

The book is a luscious 156 page trade paperback (61 pages in full color, bedsheet size at 9 7/16" x 11 13/16", selling for $24.50, from Prestel Art Books, distributed by Neues Publishing, New York) and the title is WOODY, FREUD AND OTHERS.

It is a collection of savage, urbane, witty caricatures by a 53-year-old Italian whose interpretations of Orson Welles (a mountain with a face in its massif), Johann Sebastian Bach (two stools are required to support his fundament), Albert Einstein (freewheeling on a unicycle) and virtually every important literary figure of the past hundred years — Borges to Primo Levi, Proust to Pirandello, Baudelaire to Italo Calvino — will be fresh and fancy-filled for an American audience heretofore denied Percoli's perjinkities.

This is art of a disarmingly enjoyable fullness. It may seem slight to those who breathe heavily at the acres of rosy flesh in, say, Botticelli's *La Primavera*, but the bounty is in the afterstrike, the second-take, the lingering taste on the palate. Easy on the eyes, pretty to scan, and just as you begin to turn the page, the thorn draws blood. And you look back. Oh, sweet. But deadly. Like a Dorothy Parker *bon mot*, like an Astaire *jeté*, like an apéritif served by Lucrezia Borgia. Hemingway sitting roundshouldered and abstracted, sanguine in his reverie . . . as an iconographic Ch'ing period lion leaps at his back. Pier Paolo Pasolini, he who directed the sadistic, scatological, debauched *Salo, or 120 Days of Sodom*, arguably the most depraved motion picture of all time, flesh the color of an asthmatic's piss, arms folded, staring straight at us as the blood-red rose he holds writhes with thorns. Umberto Eco, dwarfish votary, inscribing an illuminated manuscript . . . as a strangled cat hangs overhead.

Pericoli is not only a portraitist of the inner man (exactly: only one woman, Virginia Woolf, manages to crash Pericoli's old boy network), but he is a puckish fantasist whose denuding of these holy human artifacts seems almost wholly free of meanness. (His self-portrait casts him as Little Nemo in Slumberland.) Here is a sight-filled elegance to which the sophisticated intellect will return again and again, a first American publication of work that may one day be found somewhere between Daumier and Botero.

The passionate range of Christian art may be filled with fantastic tropes — angels, demons, resurrections and transcendancies — rich in the stuff of legend become literal; Amerindian art may inveigle with spider-women and manitou

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images, preserving in line and color the oral traditions of a people parted from their land; Vedantist sculpture and painting may resonate with the dark presences of Shiva, Kali and the bodhi tree; but I challenge anyone to name an artistic aesthetic more drenched in magic than the Dreamtime of the Australian Aborigine.

What's that you say? A few fading cave paintings, a cairn of pebbles and sticks, snakes drawn in sand . . . how can we be expected to dine well on such thin broth?

You've been sitting down at the wrong banquet halls.

The feast you've denied yourself is to be found in a new volume from George Braziller Publishers. DREAMINGS: *The Art of Aboriginal Australia* by Peter Sutton (272 pp., 150 color plates, 100 b&w, $65) is the "first comprehensive study . . . of the oldest continuous art tradition known."

In clear and exhaustive prose, Sutton traces The Dreaming, the itinerary of the Ancestral Beings' travels; the People Maker, the Ruling Mother, the Olgas, the Clever Man; the cagey bunyip; the visual handing-down of a society where secrecy is "not an absolute but a continuum."

Beautiful. Mysterious. But most of all, enthralling, in the sense that it takes possession of one's senses and wonderment. The Dreamtime is pervasive, enchanting in the way that road hypnosis during a thousand mile drive is enchanting: the point of perception narrows and passes through a membrane to another state entirely. All this, in the work of the Aboriginal artists.

Though I come late to it (its publication in 1985 slipped through my epistemophilial seine), a recommendation herewith: J. P. Telotte's excellent monograph on that master of cinematic suspense, Val Lewton. For all the *schlockmeisters* currently engaged in visualizing every last gobbet of gore produced by the likes of Jason Voorhees, Freddy Krueger, Michael Myers and Norman Bates, here is yet another testimonial to the importance and artistry of subtlety and misdirection in filmic matters horrific: DREAMS OF DARKNESS: *Fantasy and the Films of Val Lewton* (University of Illinois Press, $18.95). Lewton, legendary creative intelligence behind RKO's "horror unit" that produced B features of unparalleled excellence during the 1940s, from the surreal chiller *Cat People* (1942) to *Bedlam* (1946), demonstrated how films that shock and terrify can be crafted without insulting the intelligence of the audience, without recourse to the bloated special effects and cheap theatrics so totemized

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by today's artistically dessicated filmmakers. And though considerably drier than, say, the 1973 Joel Siegal study of Lewton, THE REALITY OF TERROR, which was distinguished by Siegal's actually hunting down primary sources and ferreting through the defunct RKO files for fascinating new minutiae, Telotte's academic approach dignifies the Lewton career in such manner that even the most lumpbrained slasher-horror devotee with confused or no criteria will derive desperately needed lessons in alternatives to the dripping blade, the kitten leaping out of darkness, the pulsing viscera.

Another tardy recommendation, nonetheless eminently giftable (did I make that up? is it grammatically loopy?) for my coming to it months after it has won major awards, is the Ursus Imprints edition of FIRST MAITZ: *Selected Works by Don Maitz*. You likely won't be able to find one of the 224-copy slipcased, signed collector's editions originally proffered at $45, but there are still lots of copies of the $25 trade edition. The printing is lip-smackingly luminescent, the design is clean and crisp, the running commentary by Maitz and the introduction by Gene Wolfe informative and easy on the idiomatics, but it is the scope and sheer *magic* of Don Maitz's artwork, inevitably, that makes this a book to cherish. I am not the first to say it: he is special.

Maitz has been around a relatively short time, little more than sixteen years as an illustrator. But while others have dominated the genre with their sweaty deltoids and flawless, soulless airbrush vacuities, Maitz has been quietly going about his business updating the Orientalists, painting in a way that is as far beyond his contemporaries as Michelangelo was beyond his. And if you think I invoke the master's name inappropriately — for if there is a reservation where Maitz is concerned, it is only this: too often the material he is required to illustrate is beneath his highest abilities — all one need do is gaze with clear eyes on his oils "The Road to Corlay" or "Flashman in the Great Game," as perfect a contemporary rendering of the lessons the Fauvists taught us as anything I can bring to mind.

We live in days of movies and television. We are watching. Too often we forget that we were given eyesight so that we might use what men and woman put on canvas to make our own stories. This, too, is watching. The dreams on the page are always there, unlike screen images. This has been a series of reminders, till the screen lights again. Keep watching.

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Mystery and SF writer Edward Wellen has written many stories for F&SF over the years, most recently "Waswolf" (September 1987). His new story concerns superstar musician Lorand Core, who was either dead or on ice . . .

COOL CAT

By Edward Wellen

A BELL RANG WHEN THE loud man in the loud clothes opened the pet shop door. The white Abyssinian kitten was the only creature that did not look to see who came in. It kept right on taking swipes at its favorite toy, its mother's tail. If it had known there were such things as Manx cats, it would have counted itself blessed not to have been born a Manx. If there had been a Manx kitten in the shop, the Manx kitten watching the Abyssinian kitten might have come down with tail envy.

The pet shop owner, busy grooming a poodle in the back room, did not respond at once to the bell.

Windows and cage doors rattled as the man asked at the top of his lungs if there was anyone in the place.

Again the white kitten was the only creature there that did not give a start.

"Mm mmmm mmm mm m mmmmmm, mmm."

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It was the loud man's turn to give a start. "What?"

The pet shop owner removed her dust mask. "Be with you in a minute, sir."

She stashed the half-fluffed poodle in a cage, peeled off her plastic gloves, removed her apron, fluffed up her own hair, and came forward. She stopped short.

Like everyone in Nashville, not to say the entire civilized world, she recognized Pop Devlin, superstar Lorand Core's business manager. Pop Devlin lurked in the background of virtually every shot of Lorand, hovered in the wings at every live concert starring Lorand.

Now that she saw him in the flesh and near at hand, she had to hide her instant dislike. Begolded and bejeweled, a mugger's delight, he still conveyed an inner poverty. Tailored, haircutted, facialed, manicured, he still conveyed an inner scruffiness. She collected herself, and moved to meet Devlin with a big smile.

Behind the smile, she thought frantically about what expensive exotic animal to push. Whatever she did not have, she could get.

But Devlin had no eyes for the macaws, the monkeys, or the snakes. He made straight for the cage holding the Abyssinian cat and her litter of six.

He looked down at them. "Like to get me one of them cute little kittens to give for a gift. They ready to go?"

The pet shop owner swallowed her disappointment. "That they are, Mr. Devlin."

He puffed up a bit. "You know who I am?"

"Everybody knows who you are, Mr. Devlin."

He laughed, and she knew she had a sure sale, however puny. But it might lead to bigger sales.

"Well, not quite everybody. I'm sure a few folks in China ain't got the slightest notion who I might be." He roared with laughter, and the monkeys cowered and the pups whimpered and the macaws screeched. "But even that may change. Confidentially" — his voice dropped to mere thunder — "I'm lining up a tour in China for Lorand."

"That's wonderful news, Mr. Devlin."

"Yeah. But about them kittens. Gimme the rundown on them."

"They're pure Abyssinian. They're in their twelfth week, so they can be taken from their mother. They're wormed and fully inoculated. And they're trained to use the tray."

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"Sounds great. You sold me, ma'am. Now all I gotta do is take my pick, right?"

She started to say yes, then saw his gaze on the white one and caught herself in time. "Any but the white one, Mr. Devlin."

That took him aback, rubbed him the wrong way some. "Why? That one spoken for?" He stared at the white kitten covetously.

The pet shop owner had to allow that the blue-eyed white kitten was the liveliest and cutest of the lot. It looked playful, curious, and trusting. That was why she had kept it though she knew she should have put it to sleep as soon as she found out what was wrong with it.

She hesitated. It would be easier to lie and say it had been sold, but she saw that Devlin had set his mind on the white kitten and that he stood ready to outbid anyone for it. If she let him buy it without telling him the truth about it, that would be the first and last thing she ever sold him.

She drew breath. "No, I haven't sold it, and I can't sell it. It shouldn't be in the cage with the others. It's deaf."

Devlin stared at it. "Deaf?" he hollered.

The mother flattened her ears, and the other kittens shrank, but the white kitten didn't blink.

Devlin drew out a fat wallet. "If that's all, I'll take it."

The pet shop owner hesitated again. "You don't plan to breed it, do you?"

"Hell no, ma'am. It ain't for me, anyway. I told you it's a gift."

"Well, you might tell whoever gets it that when it's about nine months old, it can be castrated. That way it won't pass along the deafness genes."

"Sure," he said in a soothing rumble. "I'll hand that word on."

She knew he didn't mean it, but she had done her ethical best. The customer was always right. She made out a bill of sale.

The mother cat looked up at the faces looking down and sensed the coming loss. She turned toward the white kitten.

It felt the vibration of her purr, the tough love of her tongue.

Then great hands came down and lifted it up and away.

Lorand Core noodled on his guitar, trying to come up with something new — a catchy melodic line, a hook, an attention-grabber. So far he had come up only with chord changes on his old tunes, which were in turn chord changes on other people's old tunes.

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Not that that was something to be ashamed of. Admittedly building on the work of black artists, he had been *the* trendsetter.

But that was a generation ago. Now he wondered if he could keep up with the new trends, with techno-billy and rasta-funk.

Not that he had to. He could rest on his hardy laurels — another fine mess you've gotten us into — if he wanted to sit grinning stupidly the rest of his life. There'd always be old hard-core Lorand Core worshipers.

But if his fans were old, that meant *he* was old. He wanted the new young; they would rejuvenate *him*, keep *him* young. He was hot to prove his cool.

Crack was the in thing these days. Maybe if he wrote a song glorifying crack. . . .

Not openly, of course. Get away with it after the manner of the Beatles with "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," and Peter, Paul and Mary with "Puff, the Magic Dragon," and Anthony Newley with "The Candy Man." You could always deny that you meant what you meant.

He began to free-associate. Step on a crack . . . stepmother's back . . . crack of dawn . . . crack the whips . . . crack wise. . . .

There'd be controversy about it even if he had to start the whisper as to its true meaning himself. If a few stations banned it, so much the better. The curious, the would-be-in-the-knowers, would buy the record.

A timid knock on the door.

He scowled and switched off the tape recorder.

The studio on his estate had a building to itself. It gave him privacy to practice and compose and play and listen and just nod off. His staff had orders never to intrude when the red light burned outside the door.

Looked like his wife would have to have the same orders.

The doorknob turned, and in Jewel came, carrying a tray with covered dishes and wearing a timid smile on her lovely face.

Lovely she might be, but the timid, patient, loving smile maddened him. He had a mind to get shut of her.

She spoke earnestly, like a child playing house. "A workin' man needs a solid meal. My daddy always expected one, and my mama always fixed him one. Said she might have to eat for two, but he had to eat for three."

He looked at the swell of her belly. She had to eat for two these days. He was still of a mind to get shut of her, but now that she was knocked up and he was satisfied that he was the one who had knocked her up, he

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would wait till she birthed the baby. Then, if he still found her a pain, a drag, he'd get his hired legal guns to fix it so the courts ruled her an unfit mother and gave him sole custody. Meanwhile, though childishly sappy as ever, she had a glow that teased him, a mysterious air of knowing — not so much with the mind as with the body — something he didn't and couldn't know.

He lifted the lids on the dishes. "I ain't hungry, but if I was, I wouldn't want none of this crap."

Her smile cracked. "I thought —"

He feasted his eyes on her trembling mouth and chin, her burning cheeks, ears, and brow. "You thought. That doll face ain't made for thinking. You-all go on back to the main house and sit yourself down, and if you gotta think, think nice thoughts for Junior."

Jewel whirled quickly, as if to hide what was happening to her face. Too quickly; a dish slid off the tray.

He smiled to himself. Fine, another fine mess. He grabbed the tray. "Here, let me take this before you spill more. No, don't bother picking up. Ain't got time for that while I'm trying to create. Old Sally can come down and clean the mess after I'm through working." He shook his head. "You got no idea what these interruptions cost me. They break the flow."

She looked horror-struck. "Oh, I wouldn't for the world —"

"I believe you. But from now on, when you see the red light on, don't even tippy-toe in. Understand?"

Her head already lowered, she nodded, then left.

He waited a listening bit, then wolfed down all that remained on the tray. He had a whetted appetite, too, for work. Jewel had given him the inspiration he needed for his crack song. *Oh, I wouldn't for the world. . . .* The world. He got the tape recorder rolling again. The words and music came together naturally.

There's a crack in the world that needs filling in;
If you fill it full of pleasure, that ain't no sin.
Fill it higher and higher till it's all smoothed out.
Till there's no more worry and no more doubt.

There's a crack in the world like a dirty smile,
Where everything's base and everything's vile;

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There's a crack in the world that needs filling in,
Listen to me, baby, here's how to begin. . . .

When you crossed the Cumberland River into the bluegrass countryside, you were in a whole other world. Pop Devlin roared his silver Porsche through the pleasant swells and curves of well-groomed nature and felt enjoyment though his mind was elsewhere. He tapped and hummed along with the cassette of Lorand's last big hit, some six years old now, and even sang along with the lyrics in his cracked voice, though his mind was still elsewhere. He made up in volume what he lacked in musicality.

I don't need a maybe baby,
Got one shot, there's only one lap,
Life's too short for that kind of crap.

I can't wait on a later 'gator,
Hardly starts before it's a wrap,
Life's too short for that kind of crap.

Time's too precious, you're soon dust and ashes.

Wake up, baby, you needed that slap,
Got eternity for that nap,
Life's too short for that kind of crap.

That shortened the road; he reached Fanfair almost before he knew it. He looked down at the fancy pet carrier he had sprung for on the seat beside him. The ride had lulled the white kitten, and, deaf as it was, neither his voice nor the music had disturbed it. Through the carrier's screen window, he saw that it lay dreaming; from time to time, a slight jerking passed through its limbs.

Before he tooted his horn at the gate, he opened the glove compartment and took out a syringe safely ensconced in a plastic foam case. He tucked the case in the right side pocket of his jacket.

Two ways of handling the upcoming showdown: the nice way and the not-so-nice way. If Lorand listened to reason, fine. If not, equally fine — maybe even better.

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He tooted now and rolled his window down and leaned his head out.

A camera eye stared at him, and a metallic voice asked him to identify himself and state his business.

He let loose. "Damn it, Orville, you know who this is."

The overwrought iron agonies of the gate to Fanfair swung open, and the Porsche roared up the long drive.

Old Sally let him in, beaming as always at the sight of him. All the help at Fanfair always beamed at Pop Devlin. He made it a point to hand out the fat Christmas checks himself. Old Sally reached for the pet carrier, but he waved her away and set it down on the parquet.

"It's only a bitty kitty for Miz Jewel. She about?"

"I'll tell her you're here, Mr. Pop."

"You do that, Sally. Don't give away about the kitten, though."

Sally grinned her full set at him.

Pop hummed away five minutes, then Jewel came carefully down the winding staircase. He saw why the care. The pretty little thing was eight months along.

She let him smack her wetly on the cheek. He sensed a slight flinching, but put it down to her natural nervousness. He pulled back for a good look at her face. She still seemed almost a child, but he noticed for the first time tight little lines around the corners of her mouth. Life with Lorand Core was not easy.

But her eyes brightened as they tried to see behind Pop's legs. "Old Sally said you brung me a present, but she wouldn't say what."

"Let you see for yourself." He turned and bent to open the carrier.

She leaned over to see, and Pop grew disturbingly aware of her closeness.

"A kitty!" She bent lower.

She had on a terry cloth robe that hung loose on her except where the terry cloth belt cinched it to her waist. The robe gaped open at the top as she bent.

Pop lost a moment looking, then caught himself up in a hurry. "Don't strain yourself, Miz Jewel. I'll fetch it out for you."

The kitten stirred into wakefulness at his touch, then squirmed muscularly till he got a good grip on it. It felt warm and tight as he picked it up and handed it to her.

She held it high and stared into its blue eyes, then cradled it and

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pressed her cheek to its cheek. It closed its eyes to slits and mewled.

"Gladdens my heart to see how you take to each other."

He saw her wince a bit at his volume, but that was all right. His volume was what helped him dominate.

"Thanks, Pop. Sweet of you to think of giving me a kitten."

"Don't mention it. I happened past this pet shop and spotted this little feller all by its lonesome in the window. Felt right sorry for it. Don't know why, but right then I said to myself it was born to be Miz Jewel's to take care of."

"Aw, poor little kitty." She kissed its nose.

Made a pretty picture, but he had come on business. "Proud as I am to see you, little lady, I came to speak with Lorand." He looked around. "He *is* to home?"

"He's in the studio. Have to warn you, though. When that red light's on, can't nobody go in."

"Even you?" He said it with ponderous levity.

"Even me." She said it so lightly that he guessed how much she cared.

He shook his head sorrowfully. "Well, I'll just have to risk his wrath."

WATCHING POP Devlin head down the slope to the studio building, Jewel stroked the kitten and felt guilty that she still did not care for the man. The kitten squirmed, and Jewel put it down on the floor and watched to see what it would make of its new surroundings.

It made itself right at home, sniffing the potted plants, the bowls of fruits and nuts, but only one thing truly interested it — the belt to Jewel's robe. One end of the belt dangled low and frisked with Jewel's movements as Jewel revolved to watch the kitten's. The kitten maybe thought the belt end was a tail, and raised itself up and batted at the belt end.

"Oh, you want to play, do you?"

Jewel and the kitten had themselves a time playing — till Jewel stopped in the middle of a laugh.

Better not get too fond of the kitten. Lorand had yet to learn of its presence. When he did find out, he very well might say he didn't want it at Fanfair.

Lorand was two different people. Not just his public person and his private person. The first time she had seen him offstage without his gold

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cape and platform shoes, when she interviewed him for her high school paper, the human side appealed more than the idol side. The human side was a vulnerable man who convinced her he was all partied out and aching to settle down and have a family.

He had got a new hit out of that:

Time to settle down.
Found me a woman,
Woman meant for me.

Tired of runnin' 'round.
Wanna feel human,
Human as can be. . . .

But once they married, she learned about the other side of the human side. Because his private person alone was made up of two people. One minute he could love her tender; next minute he could say or do some hurtful thing.

Take what had happened in the studio just a bit ago. Or yesterday's episode: he had given her a new station wagon, then, when she had flooded the carburetor trying it out, he had said she didn't know her bowel from her elbow, snatched the key out of the ignition, and hurled the set of keys into the trees.

Her mouth thinned to a line as she played that back to herself. Just for that, she would let the station wagon sit right there till it died of rust.

A tug at her belt that tore it loose and opened her robe brought her to. The kitten's claws had caught in the material and pulled the belt loose. She freed the claws and the belt from each other, then tied the belt tight about her waist and tucked the end in so that it stayed out of reach. The kitten sank down on its haunches and cocked its head at her as if listening for her intentions. She tried to look back coldly.

"Brought your little woman a cute little kitty."

Lorand gave him a funeral wreath of a smile. "Be real handy if I need catgut."

"Naw, you'll fall in love with it just like Jewel done."

Lorand looked thoughtful. "Loves it, does she?"

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Pop shook a finger. "You been talking to accountants behind my back."

Lorand stiffened. "You couldn't know that unless —"

Pop nodded as at a prize pupil. "'Fraid some of your people here been selling you out."

Lorand narrowed his eyes. "You're the main one been selling me out."

Pop shook his head. "Harsh words, Lorand, harsh words. I been selling you from the start, not selling you out." He pointed to the gleaming disks hung on the wall. "How you think you got all them gold and platinum records?"

"My writing and singing might have something to do with it."

Pop overrode him. "Promotion, Lorand, promotion. The old payola to get radio airplay. It all costs."

"I know it costs, but I also know I'm due a lot more royalties than I'm getting."

"Your advances are cross-collateralized against publishing receipts. Expenses eat up your royalties. For an instance, the record company covers the expenses of your concert tours. Costs ten thousand dollars a day just to keep the band on the road. We're half a million in the hole on the last tour alone. On top of that —"

Lorand covered his ears. He waited till Pop shut his mouth in frustration. Then Lorand uncovered his ears and spoke. "Louder don't make you righter. I heard all the double-talk I want to hear from you. We got nothing more to say to each other till after I get that outside accounting. Meanwhile, that red light you paid no mind to is burning. I got work you're keeping me from." He moved to the tape recorder, but when he turned around to pick up his guitar, he found Pop still there, watching him with brooding eyes. "You going to go like I told you to?"

For once Pop spoke quietly. "No."

Lorand stepped to the intercom and pressed a key. "Orville, get your ass over here to the studio. Pop is leaving, and I want you to see him out."

Pop stood silently and sadly.

The kitten nibbled at a leaf of a potted plant.

Jewel watched with a smile. Poor thing must be hungry. She would get Sally to fix it something.

Before she could move to do so, the smile turned to a look of horror.

"Sally!"

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Old Sally caught the terror in Jewel's call and hotfooted in. A look told her what had happened. The kitten was bad sick, bringing up vomit that could barely squeeze past a swollen tongue. She took a handkerchief from an apron pocket and wiped the mouth out as much as she could. She showed Jewel bits of leaf and nodded toward the nibbled plant.

"Cat done bit into dumb cane."

"How bad is it? What can we do about it?"

Sally lifted her shoulders. "If it don't kill in the next little while, it wear off in time."

Jewel let out a moan. "We can't wait to see."

She grabbed a telephone directory and raced through the yellow pages for the address of the nearest vet, dialed, got the doctor, and began to spill out what had happened.

"Whoa! Take it easy, ma'am. Tell me real slow what the problem is."

She took a deep breath and told him, real slow.

"Bring him over, right quick, and a leaf of the plant he was eating."

She grabbed her purse and told Old Sally to tell Mr. Lorand where she was going, stuck the kitten in the carrier, tore off a leaf of the plant and put it in her purse, stowed the purse and carrier in the station wagon, then remembered Lorand had thrown the car keys away. She hollered for Old Sally to help her hunt in the direction she recalled Lorand had thrown the keys, and they scouted through trees and grass. She herself found the keys.

She forced herself to calm down so that she would not flood the carburetor again. She steadied her hand by taking time to wound her mouth with lipstick. Then she turned the key in the ignition and got the car going. It had a lovely purr.

Lorand's bodyguard Orville Kelso edged into the studio. Orville measured the full of the door, so he was no one to mess with. Lorand grinned expectantly. Pop Devlin would change his mind about not leaving. The old loudmouth might not leave quietly, but he would leave. The old mule might not leave under his own power, but he would leave.

Pop searched Orville's face and smiled faintly.

Lorand gave Orville a go-ahead nod. But Orville stood by with folded arms as Pop drew a narrow plastic-foam case from his jacket pocket and lifted the lid off and eased out a syringe. The cylinder of the syringe held nasty-looking liquid.

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"What you think you're doing, Pop? You want to shoot up, do it on your own time and at your own place."

Pop spoke loudly and firmly. "It's for you, Lorand."

Lorand snorted. "Did I ask you for a fix? What I need I get from Doc Molloy. Pure prescription stuff. You trying to poison me? I don't want no evil-looking stuff from you."

Pop held the cylinder up to the light. "It is evil-looking, isn't it? But I wouldn't call it poison. What it is, is a neurotoxin."

"A new what?"

"You heard of zombie powder?"

Lorand's eyes widened. "You're talking voodoo? Pop, you have gone out of your skull."

Pop shook his head. "There's science behind it: 'pears something in the crazy ingredients helps lower the metabolism to simulate death. I found me a Haitian isolated the chemicals that do the job. So this stuff ain't as evil as it looks. No toads, lizards, tarantulas, human bone." He held the syringe ready. "Mind lifting your sleeve a bit higher?"

Lorand broke free of the powerfully intoning voice. "Damn it, Orville, stop standing by with your arms folded. Grab the crazy bastard and throw him the hell out."

Orville unfolded his arms.

Lorand's eyes glittered. "About time."

But Orville reached out and grabbed hold of Lorand and held him still while Pop injected the liquid.

By the time Lorand believed what was happening, it had happened.

Orville let go and stepped back from him.

Lorand stood stiff and unseeing.

Pop studied him. "Better ease him to the floor before he tips over."

Orville did so, but the blood that rushed to his head as he bent fled as he straightened. He looked pale. "You told me you wasn't gonna kill him. You said this was a death-penalty state, and so you wasn't gonna kill him."

Pop put the empty syringe back into the plastic-foam case pending disposal. "And I didn't kill him."

"He ain't breathing. To me that's dead."

Pop's eyes flickered, and a crease appeared between them. He put fingers to Lorand's carotoid. His eyes burned steady again, and the crease vanished. "Very, very faint, but he's ticking. Don't fret yourself, Orville.

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Worst comes to worst and it all falls apart and they charge us with murder, we can always bring him back. Most they can get us for is assault."

Orville's frame relaxed, but the shadow of doubt lay deep in his eyes.

Jewel slowed the station wagon as she neared the gate to give the electric eye time to open the gate. As soon as she saw enough space to get through, she roared the station wagon into the outer world. She reached the animal hospital in an eternity of five minutes.

As she parked in the animal hospital's lot, a man and a woman came out of the animal hospital and headed for a car two spaces over. The man's arms cradled a black plastic bundle. The woman unlocked the car trunk and raised the lid. The man carefully put the bundle in the trunk, then gently slammed the lid shut.

A bad omen, and Jewel shivered as she hauled the pet carrier out of the station wagon.

But the vet, a heavy, rumpled man who at first seemed too slow-moving to suit her, saw them right away and soon put her mind at rest. He examined the kitten and got air into it to relieve its breathing. He looked at the leaf of the plant and rubbed it and nodded.

"Dumb cane, sure enough. *Dieffenbachia* seguine, to be specific. They call it Tropic Snow. It has tiny needle-like calcium oxalate crystals. When the plant tissues touch mucous membranes, like when you lick it or bite it, there's irritation and swelling of tongue, mouth, and throat. It can close the vocal cords, so you lose your voice, and you can suffocate from swelling around the windpipe."

The kitten seemed much improved after an injection, but she followed the vet's advice and left the kitten at the animal hospital for observation at least overnight.

The vet had a word for Jewel herself. He could not have not noticed her pregnancy, and he warned her to keep away from the kitten's litter box.

Everything had turned out all right, but Jewel felt more than a bit shaky on the drive home. Life was full of scary things that could happen to anyone anytime.

She hoped Lorand would not pick at her over what had happened to the poor little kitten and put the blame for it on her. How was she supposed to know about dumb cane by that or any other name?

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Her first thought on getting back home to Fanfair was to get rid of the potted Tropic Snow dumb cane, not just for the kitten's sake because it might not have learned its lesson, but for Junior's because she sure wanted nothing like what had happened to the kitten to happen to Junior. But Sally and Pop and Orville — and Doc Molloy, so she knew right off something was bad wrong — stood waiting for her, and what they had to tell her made her forget all about the dread plant.

Lorand dead? She refused to believe them.

She refused to believe Lorand's body even when she saw it for herself. They had him all laid out on the king-sized bed in the master bedroom.

So still, so pale. But he could not be dead.

She flung herself across his body. "Wake up, Lorand! Wake up!"

He did not stir.

Gentle hands, but firm, pulled her away.

She sat numbly, pretending to take a sip whenever someone urged her to of coffee laced with brandy. She had just enough wits about her to remember what her gynecologist had said about staying away from alcohol while she carried Junior. As it was, she was drunk enough on the sudden disorder of her life.

Pop was holding forth. He muted his stentorian voice to a level befitting the funereal occasion, yet conveyed urgency rather than consolation. They had to make plans, he rumbled; they had to protect and preserve Lorand's image.

Jewel eyed him dully. "I don't understand."

"That's because you're still in shock, little lady. I know it's hard on you, but I gotta be blunt."

He lifted the lid on a cardboard shoe box he held under his arm. Bottles and bottles of tablets and capsules filled the box.

"First thing we gotta do is get rid of all this. I'll take care of it personal."

But the sly way he glanced at Doc Molloy, and the worried way Doc Molloy fixed on the box, gave Jewel the idea Pop meant to hold the prescription drugs over Doc.

Pop took on a holy look. "I'm thinking of you, little lady, and of Lorand's good name, and of the child of his you're bearing, and of the millions of Lorand Core fans — the folks that, like he said, really built Fanfair. Think how it would read: *Lorand Dead of Overdose.* And picture the

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terrible disillusionment. No, ma'am, we can't let the world know that he abused drugs. We got to say he died of something natural."

Something more bitter than unsweetened coffee and brandy filled Jewel's mouth. "Such as?"

"Massive heart attack. What do you say to that, Doc?"

Doc Molloy looked eager to agree, but something seemed to hold him silent.

Pop raised an eyebrow. "Won't that hold up, Doc?"

Doc tongued his lips nervously. "Just had his yearly checkup. Nothing showed up on his cardiograms. That's not to say a massive heart attack doesn't hit someone right after he's had a clean bill of health. But it could make me look bad."

"We wouldn't want that." Pop looked around, and his gaze locked on Jewel's torso. He smiled.

Jewel glanced down and saw that she still had on the terry cloth robe she had rushed out in. She moved to close the upper part of the robe, but Pop was staring below her breasts. She saw white hairs on the pink terry cloth.

And that had to be it, because he said to Doc, "Lorand has one little mark on him we can say is a cat scratch. People die of infection from cat scratches, don't they, Doc?"

Doc Molloy grasped at that. "They do, they do. Could be sudden toxic shock."

Jewel sat up straight. "No. Lorand never even got to see the kitty."

They all stared at her.

Pop boomed soothingly, "Now, little lady—"

She shook her head. "You ain't gonna blame the kitty."

Pop lost his half-smile and swelled his chest. She braced herself for his plain intention to beat her down. But she met his gaze, and the air went out of him. He shrugged and turned to Doc Molloy.

"Sorry, Doc, but it's gonna be massive heart attack after all."

Jewel smiled faintly, then gave a cry of pain.

Old Sally made it for what it was before Doc Molloy. "Mr. Lorand's death done set it off. She's going into labor."

Again without changing out of the terry cloth robe, she left the house. This time in an ambulance that sped her to the hospital where her gyne-

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cologist, having got word, would be standing by. Just before she left, Pop pressed her hand and told her not to worry about a thing; he would take care of all the arrangements for Lorand.

This brought a flood of tears, but life quickly won over death, and she fixed all her might and main on Junior.

Junior had to spend the first weeks of his life in an incubator, but was just fine, and in Jewel's eyes favored his daddy, though of course it was really much too early to point here at his nose and here at his chin and prove that.

After they came home and found the kitten already there and playful, curious, and trusting as ever in the care of Old Sally, she had time to remember the dumb cane. Her first thought was to get rid of it. But when Old Sally told her the kitten would not go near it, she decided to keep it after all. Deep down, she hated to throw anything away. But for Junior's sake, against the time when Junior would crawl and grab the world and test everything in it with his mouth, she had Old Sally move the potted Tropic Snow to an unused sunny room way at the top of the house. Because they kept it out of drafts, and saw that it didn't get chilled during the night, and checked for spider mites on the underside of leaves and for mealybugs at leaf nodes and axils, and wiped leaves with a damp cloth once a month to remove dust, and kept the potting mixture moist, the Tropic Snow grew to six feet high in its large container. They gave it loving care, but despite the creamy variegations on the large green leaves, it never became a plant Jewel really loved. And of course she remembered the harm it could do, and she kept the room locked.

Pop Devlin gave Jewel and her young 'un time to settle in before he spelled out the true nature of the arrangements he had told her he would take care of. He couldn't put off telling her any longer, because Orville or Old Sally would sooner or later let the truth slip out. Or because Jewel herself might stumble on it any day now, though she had no call to visit the walk-in freezer. Or because the maintenance person would be coming every month in keeping with the perpetual-care agreement; the unmarked van would not give anything away if anyone noticed it entering Fanfair, but the maintenance person would have to announce identity and pur-

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pose to get in, and if Jewel overheard, she might get curious and ask questions Orville and Old Sally would get flustered trying to field.

So, all in all, Pop had to break it to her sometime, and sometime was now.

He came roaring in casually and fussed over Junior and Snowflake perfunctorily, then took Jewel aside for the shock treatment.

"I know you don't want to think about Lorand in his grave."

She shivered, then stared at him. "Then why bring it up if you know I don't want to think about it?"

"Because I wanna tell you that you don't have to think about it."

She frowned in puzzlement. "Come again?"

"He ain't there."

She narrowed her eyes. "One of *us* ain't all there. I saw him buried, so I know it ain't me."

He watched her eyes remember the burial. Weak from delivering Junior, she had against her doctor's advice attended the funeral and interment. Even with police and private security, the thousands and thousands of fans had got out of hand. Enough crowding and screaming and fainting had gone on to scare Pop, though he himself had orchestrated much of it. He saw her reached that point and recalled her peril. Orville had saved her from must've harm by putting his mass between her and the mob-monster reaching its myriad claws to tear some souvenir from the grave, from the floral display, from her.

Pop brought her back from the edge of Lorand's grave. "You thought you saw him buried. Everyone else thought so, too — all but the few of us in the know."

He watched it sink in.

"Then if he's not there, where is he — and why?"

He looked down, and stomped the floor a few times. He nearly cracked a smile as the foot tapping put him in mind of Lorand setting the tempo for his backup. "Down below, in cold storage. Same as you, I hated to think of him rotting in the ground. I fixed it so he'd keep till the day doctors learn to undo what damage the drugs did him. Then we can bring him back to life."

Jewel fainted, dropped like a leaf.

Pop eyed her dispassionately; she would come around. Then not so dispassionately; she was really a lovely thing.

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The cryogenic chamber took up space behind a partition in the walk-in freezer.

He went cold with the thought that he had made one grand mistake. He should've finished Lorand, fear of death penalty notwithstanding. Should've let the burial be a burial. With Lorand out of the way permanent, he could've moved in on Jewel. Could've had him a ready-made family — and added to it. He was not all that old. The handle "Pop" had come to him in his twenties with his prematurely white hair.

Jewel stirred.

No. Reason mastered passion. Better this way. Stay in control. So long as his head ruled his heart, he would rule the estate. Had to look at Jewel with a cold eye. It would be hard to be hard on Jewel if he let himself go soft on her. This way, if Jewel got to questioning the accounts, he would not shrink from adding her to Lorand in the cryogenic chamber.

He chafed her hands, and she opened her eyes and sat up.

She pulled free and shoved to her feet. "I'm all right."

He looked at her closely. "How all right? Steady enough to go take a look at Lorand?"

She swayed, then steadied. She nodded.

"Then let Old Sally fetch you your heaviest coat. It's cold down there. Real cold."

The cryogenic chamber took up space behind a newly built partition in the walk-in freezer. You had to get past hanging meat and shelves of TV dinners to see the door in the partition. A keypad on the wall beside the door controlled the lock.

Pop lifted Jewel's hand to the keypad. "You remember Lorand's sign?"

She sent him scorn. "Of course. Leo."

"Leo in capital letters. Upside down, that's 037. Go ahead, press 0, 3, 7."

She did so, and the door swung open.

A sense of utter coldness rushed out at them in a chilling wave. They stiffened themselves to enter, and brought clouds of breath into the chamber.

What looked like a huge thermos bottle lay on its length atop a platform. Frost coated this container. Jewel followed Pop to the side of the

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cylinder. Pop sleeved rime from what proved to be a window. He stepped aside to let Jewel peer through the blur.

Lorand's face, misty but unmistakable.

Jewel swayed.

Pop caught her before she fell, and half-carried, half-walked her out of the chamber.

Somewhere deep in Lorand Core, so deep there burned a frozen, coruscating fire, a song sang itself silently and slowly, words Lorand did not know he knew, to a beat he did not feel he felt.

Your heart of ice best shy from heat,
Stay far from a tropic clime,
Lest your heart of ice melt or sublime.
Your heart of ice had best not beat,
Nor ring its crystalline chime,
Lest your heart of ice crack ere its time.

Somewhere deep in Lorand Core, far beyond the drone of the coolant engine, the song hummed soundlessly, in semantic phase with eternity.

The logo on the monthly statements of Polar Cryonics showed the head of an anorak-hooded Eskimo with a finger to his lips. But somehow word leaked out.

One evening three months after the funeral, Pop, expecting a report from Orville on how things were going out at Fanfair, answered his home phone and found himself on the line with an editor calling from the office of *The Popular Gazette*, the sleaziest and most profitable gossip sheet of them all.

Pop got his heart down out of his throat, pitched his voice high, and said, "No understand. You must got wrong number."

"Don't hang up on me, Mr. Devlin. We're going ahead with the story in any case, so if you want to have any input at all, don't hang up."

"What story?"

"We have it from a reliable source that Lorand is a corpsicle."

"A what?"

"A cryogenically preserved body. Word is, you have him on ice at Fan-

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fair. We'd like to send a team out there for a cover story."

"There is no story. Your source is a liar."

"There's always a story. You deny it — we holler cover-up. That would make an even bigger story."

"You print that — we sue."

"See you in court, then."

"You really ready to spend a fortune in lawyers' fees and court costs for a case you'll lose?"

"We can afford it better than you. And we'll all be long dead by the time the last appeals are exhausted."

"Then print and be damned."

"Is that a quote?"

Pop slammed the phone down.

Pop could have picked the phone right up again and dialed Fanfair to let Jewel and the others know what to expect. But he had to work off his rage and frustration before he could sound his confident and competent self. So, late as the hour was, he shoehorned into his Porsche and let it roostertail his anger along the road to Fanfair.

He blew the horn at the gate when Orville was slow to respond.

Orville tried to shrink as he let Pop into the house. "Sorry, Pop, I wasn't expecting nobody this hour."

"Damn it, Orville, you gotta expect anybody anytime."

Orville hung his head.

"Don't just stand there, Orville. Tell Jewel I'm here."

Orville mobilized himself to go tell Jewel, but Jewel spoke from the head of the staircase.

"That voice: the whole world knows you're here."

Pop gaped a moment. Jewel was wearing the beautiful silk kimono Lorand had given her. Kimono made her look cute as a geisha. Pop knew the real thing quite well, having gone with Lorand on the Japanese tour when Lorand had been at his peak. Lorand had known geisha quite well, too, and Jewel might not be wearing this kimono so lovingly if she knew Lorand had snatched it off the warm flesh of a real geisha. She came downstairs to meet Pop. She stepped carefully because Snowflake twined around her legs all the way down.

Jewel let Pop peck at her cheek, then she led him into the small sitting

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room off the big one. She took the chair, and Pop had the couch to himself. Snowflake climbed onto Jewel's lap. Pop was about to say what a pretty picture they made, but Jewel spoke first.

"What brings you here this late, Pop?"

He told her about the call from *The Popular Gazette.*

She put a hand to her throat. "What will it mean to us if they print it? Will we have to bury Lorand?"

"Hell no, little lady. Nobody believes *The Popular Gazette.* Everybody reads it, but nobody believes it. Can't nobody prove a thing. Ain't nobody got the right to violate your privacy. What you keep in your walk-in freezer is your own business. There'll be a lot of sensational speculation about Fanfair in the media — Geraldo, Oprah, and Phil will likely get into the act — and there'll be more than the usual rubbernecking outside the gates, and you'll have to keep a low profile, but next week *The Popular Gazette* will have a different cover story to feed the frenzy of the supermarket readership, and things hereabouts should get back to normal."

As Pop foretold, after the seven days' wonder that most people considered just another bit of *Popular Gazette* sleaze, things around Fanfair went back to normal — for Fanfair.

Junior and Snowflake grew apace; Jewel chronicled this with camcorder.

Old Sally grew older.

Orville grew thick around the waist.

And Pop, when he came to call, grew more stentorially overbearing — mostly because of the growing independence of Jewel.

Jewel grew more self-possessed and — though she never visited the cryogenic chamber — thought often about Lorand, and showed that by growing ever more solicitous of his name and fame. Pop did not mind that she pressed him to mark Lorand's anniversaries by reissuing old albums. Lorand still had a sizable following that could not get enough of Lorand. But it nettled Pop some when she pressed him for sales figures.

So Pop used his voice to keep her in line whenever she came anywhere near indicating an interest in an accounting.

Junior's favorite plaything was the white cat's tail. Mommy said not to pull because it hurt, but Mommy was wrong; it didn't hurt at all. Well, pulling the tail was like Orville pulling the string that got the lawn

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mower to spit and slash. But Junior was learning that life was risk. You wanted fun — you had to provoke fate and get yourself into scary situations.

The white cat didn't come when you called it by name. It had the name S'owf'ake, because it was white like the first real s'owf'akes Mommy had taken him outside to see and taste, and because it had something to do with something mysterious called T'opic S'ow that Mommy and Old Sally never took him to see. But Junior did not hold it against S'owf'ake for not answering to its name. Another aspect of fun was the chase.

When Junior chased Snowflake, Jewel or Old Sally or Orville had to chase Junior. But they lacked or had outgrown the pure primitive notion of fun. They treated it more as a chore. And because Old Sally was old and Orville was heavy on his feet, the burden mostly fell to Jewel.

Though it was not that much of a burden. Snowflake could pretty well look out for himself. He could not hear Junior creep up on him, but he could feel Junior's tread or sight Junior's shadow or smell Junior in need of a change. When Snowflake sensed Junior too close, Snowflake streaked.

At two, Junior could streak pretty well himself in a teetery-tottery way.

Jewel hauled on his harness, jerking him back just as he made a grab for Snowflake. They were out on the lawn, and Junior sat down softly enough, but that did not stop him from wailing.

The wailing brought out Old Sally, and Jewel was glad to hand Junior over to her.

"Hush there," Old Sally said. "Your mommy didn't really mean for you to get hurt." She shot Jewel an accusing look. "Come inside with Old Sally, and Old Sally will find you a brownie."

Jewel found herself alone on the lawn. She didn't want to go back into the big old house, and she didn't want to sit on the lawn, because Orville might wander over from the garage and try to put the moves on her.

Ever since Lorand's death, Orville had grown bolder and bolder. Just this past Christmas, as she stood tiptoe on a chair to put the star on the tree, she had caught Orville looking at her legs. He reddened a bit, but that didn't keep him from whispering so Old Sally couldn't hear, "Them's the best stocking stuffers I ever seen." It seemed only a matter of time before leering turned to touching. She had told Pop this, and suggested to Pop

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that Orville might be let go. Pop had beaten her down with a loud laugh at the very idea, and a loud assertion that good old Orville would never lift a finger against her, and a loud promise that he would have a talk with Orville.

So, to distance herself from the garage, she ambled down toward the studio. She hadn't gone in since Lorand turned her out of it, the day he died.

She eyed the entrance. One side of her mouth rose. No red light.

A turn of the knob told her the door was unlocked. She drew a quivery breath and swung it open. The sun warmed her shoulders, but a chill passed through her.

Inside, all looked as two years ago. No one had touched a thing. Lorand's studio, like Lorand himself, stood still in time. A shrine.

She crossed the threshold. She felt a brushing against her legs and looked down. Snowflake had come in with her.

No point yelling at Snowflake, but Snowflake seemed to understand gestures. Jewel gestured *Out!*

Snowflake might understand; that didn't mean Snowflake obeyed. Snowflake compromised; he sat down.

Jewel sighed and ignored Snowflake. She moved deeper into the studio. On closer inspection, it needed dusting. Lorand's guitar, his gold and platinum records — all screamed for Sally's duster. No; labors of love meant little if done by others. Jewel turned to fetch the duster herself.

She caught a flash of white at the edge of vision. Snowflake had launched himself and stood atop the tape recorder, proudly waving the flag of his tail.

Jewel gestured *Down!*

Snowflake must have sensed her outrage. He put a tentative paw on the front edge of the recorder, then another lower down on the keys, preparing to leap to the floor.

The click and the whir surprised the two of them.

Snowflake finished the leap and flowed on out of the studio. Jewel looked at the cassette rewinding in the tape recorder.

Thing had been on all the time, and nobody noticed.

Her eyes widened in wonder. This could be the song Lorand had been working on at his death.

With a thrill of hope and fear, she pressed *Play.*

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* * *

You going to go like I told you to!

No.

Orville, get your ass over here to the studio. Pop is leaving, and I want you to see him out.

What you think you're doing, Pop! You want to shoot up, do it on your own time and at your own place.

It's for you, Lorand.

Did I ask you for a fix! What I need I get from Doc Molloy. Pure prescription stuff. You trying to poison me! I don't want no evil-looking stuff from you.

It is evil-looking, isn't it! But I wouldn't call it poison. What it is, is a neurotoxin.

A new what!

You heard of zombie powder!

You're talking voodoo! Pop, you have gone out of your skull.

There's science behind it: 'pears something in the crazy ingredients helps lower the metabolism to simulate death. I found me a Haitian isolated the chemicals that do the job. So this stuff ain't as evil as it looks. No toads, lizards, tarantulas, human bone. Mind lifting your sleeve a bit higher!

Damn it, Orville, stop standing by with your arms folded. Grab the crazy bastard and throw him the hell out. About time.

Better ease him to the floor before he tips over.

You told me you wasn't gonna kill him. You said this was a death-penalty state, and so you wasn't gonna kill him.

And I didn't kill him.

He ain't breathing. To me that's dead.

Very, very faint, but he's ticking. Don't fret yourself, Orville. Worst comes to worst and it all falls apart and they charge us with murder, we can always bring him back. Most they can get us for is assault.

JEWEL SNATCHED the cassette out without bothering to rewind the tape. She shoved it down between her breasts.

She walked out into the sunlight, but it wasn't the blaze of day brought on the tears.

Lorand was alive. Alive.

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But before she could bring him around, she had to put Pop and Orville out of the way.

She closed the studio door and walked on up the slope.

Halfway up, a big shape got between her and the sun.

She brushed her eyes clear, then smiled radiantly and said in honeyed tones, "Why, hello there, Orville. Just the man I want to see."

Pop got a call from Orville and took a run out to Fanfair. Pop caught on that something had gone wrong. The fool had sense enough not to spell it out over the phone, but if he had been just a bit smarter, he could've given a hint. Pop had no idea what to be prepared for.

At least he didn't have to blow his horn or identify himself and state his business; the gate swung wide as he made the turn into Fanfair. But maybe that was a bad omen. Bad news makes it easy for you to hear it.

But then, when he got to the big house, it was Jewel who let him in, and he had no chance to ask Orville what it was all about.

Jewel led him into the big sitting room. The white cat had ghosted along the way and wound in and out of Jewel's path. Jewel made for the bar at the far end of the room.

Pop raised an eyebrow. "I didn't know this was a social occasion, or I would've dressed."

Jewel didn't smile. She busied herself blending a drink. "I'm gonna pour you a stiff one, Pop, and you better swallow it."

"That serious, huh?"

What major crisis brought him here? Had a power outage shut down the cryogenic engine, causing Lorand to spoil? No; the auxiliary power, a high-rated generator, would've switched on. Something else, then. Whatever it was, he had to show Jewel he was in charge.

His gaze fixed on the cat. "Here, Snowflake!"

Snowflake stayed put at Jewel's feet. Pop had forgotten it was deaf, but it was staring straight at him and knew damn well he wanted it to come over to him.

Pop strode over and bent down to grab Snowflake. Only meant to pick it up and pet it by way of reminding Jewel he had given it to her. Damn thing, no longer a cute little kitten, gave a slashing snarl that seized up Pop's heart. Pop was aware that Jewel had frozen to watch.

He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and took the rubber

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band off a wad of deposit receipts. Shoved the deposit receipts back in fast before Jewel could see what they were. He bent again to Snowflake.

Snowflake backed up against the foot of the bar. Pop blocked Snowflake with his body and swiftly wound the rubber band around Snowflake's ears in a figure eight. "Old trick to make a cat easy to handle."

And Snowflake did look worriedly subdued and puzzledly submissive.

"That's mean."

Pop raised an arm to keep Jewel from going to the cat's rescue. "It don't hurt the cat."

At least the cat wasn't struggling or mewling. He petted it roughly.

"See? We're friends."

Her face hardened. "Here's your drink."

My, my, didn't the little lady sound almost ungracious. Pop let go of Snowflake and straightened to take the drink from Jewel's hand. He grinned around the lip of the glass. Let her sound any way she wanted to long as she knew who was in charge.

He pulled at his drink.

They said alcohol thickened the tongue. The proof was in the drinking. The alcohol in the drink must have slowed his reactions, because it took him a full minute to realize something was terribly wrong. Something other than alcohol in the drink thickened his tongue.

He could not breathe. He found himself convulsed on the floor, the glass shattered and the rest of the drink spilled out, with his hands tearing at his already loose collar.

It gladdened him to see Orville rush in. But Orville was not here to help. Orville was holding him down and shouting at him.

"You was gonna skip without telling me. You was gonna skip with all Lorand's money and leave the poor little lady and her kid without nothing to their name."

"Where the hell you get that fool notion?" But it came out, "Mmmmm mmm mmmm mmm mmm mmmm mmmm mmmmmm?"

And Jewel didn't help matters by saying, "It's his conscience. I told him my banker warned me Pop was closing out Lorand's accounts — and look what happened. He had a seizure. See how guilty he looks."

"If you see anything, Orville, see how she's pitting us against each other. Watch out, big boy; your turn's next." That came out, "Mm mmm mmm mmmmmmmm, Mmmmmmm, mmm mmm mmm'm mmmmmmm

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mm mmmmmmm mmm mmmmmm. Mmmmm mmm, mmm mmm, mmmm mmmm'm mmmm."

Then nothing more came out.

Orville lifted Pop effortlessly and slung him over one shoulder. Jewel held the front door open for them to slip out. Then she ran ahead to Pop's Porsche and opened the passenger door for Orville to ease Pop onto the seat.

"You gassed up the Porsche and the station wagon? We don't want neither car to get stranded."

Orville nodded. He squeezed in behind the wheel. "What about Old Sally?"

Jewel kneaded his shoulder. "Old Sally knows he's falling-down-drunk, and we warned him not to drive home, but he won't listen. She knows I'm so worried about him I'm gonna follow him a ways in the station wagon. That's all she knows, and that's all she needs to know. Only thing on her mind right now is she gotta look in on Junior every once in a while."

Orville put his hand over her hand, making her hand disappear, then took an inside bite of his Adam's apple and pulled his hand away and settled himself to drive.

"I'm right behind you all the way," Jewel said. She turned and strode to the station wagon and got in.

Right behind him all the way, the beams of Jewel's station wagon. Gave Orville a warm, fuzzy feeling that more than made up for the queasiness Pop's body slack beside him brought on.

Traffic was light this hour of the night. They could've broken the speed limit, but he kept them together in the slow lane, letting the few cars heading the same way zoom past.

Coming up on the place he had in mind, he signaled and slowed, and she blinked her lights and slowed in tandem. Here it was, a wide curve along the edge of a high bluff.

He hit the brakes, and she must've seen the brake lights, because she coasted to a stop a few car lengths behind him, both cars along the railing.

It should look as if they had shared an accident and were exchanging licenses and insurance companies.

He got out and reached behind the seat for the tire iron he had stashed

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there. He took the tire iron to the railing, and levered and smashed a break in the railing, and then wrenched the broken ends farther and farther apart. He tossed the tire iron over into brush on the other side of the road. He got back into the car and nosed it through the break in the railing. There was screeching and scratching, but the Porsche made it through. He was sweating when he braked just short of the edge. He pulled Pop over into the driver's seat and buckled him in. Then he lowered the window and slammed the door. He walked to the rim of the bluff, and, though he feared heights, he forced himself to look down at the Cumberland gleaming darkly back from far below, swirls of moonlight and blackness melding in the flow. He walked back to the road and looked both ways.

No beams far as he could see in either direction. Now.

With the hand brake off and the gearshift in neutral and his hand reaching in on the steering wheel, he put his weight into rolling the Porsche over the edge. He let go and pulled away just in time. He thought he saw Pop's head loll forward.

Over the Porsche went, and thumped down the face of the bluff and splashed into the river.

He turned and gave Jewel a thumbs-up — and stood frozen so.

Jewel was leaning out the driver's side of the station wagon, pointing her camcorder at him.

She pulled back in and gave *him* a thumbs-up. She called out to him. "Got the whole thing, Orville. You're a video star."

He was still framing the word, "What?" or, "Why?" when she backed the station wagon away from him. He started to run after her, but she stepped up the withdrawal and then got out of reverse and spun the station wagon around and sped out of sight.

He stood slack-jawed till beams headed toward him from the opposite direction. Then he shrank into himself and began plodding head down along the road, hoping to make it unnoticed to the nearest town before some driver reported the break in the railing or somebody down by the river reported the accident and police began swarming all over the place.

But over and over in his mind played the words, "That Jewel."

As soon as she got back to Fanfair, she checked the sitting room and found Old Sally had picked up the broken glass and mopped the tiled floor of the bar area. Old Sally had cleared away, too, the pitcher of the blender.

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Jewel hardly ever ventured into the kitchen. That was Old Sally's venue. But now Jewel went into the kitchen and took the blender pitcher from the draining board tray and ran it through detergent foam once again and rinsed it thoroughly to make sure there'd be no slightest trace of the milky residue of pureed dumb cane leaves. And she picked the pieces of broken glass out of the trash and put them inside a stout paper bag and hammered them to sparkling dust with a wooden tenderizer. Then she washed the dust and torn-up paper bag into the waste disposal.

Just when she finished all this, the phone rang.

She wiped her hands and lifted the phone and said, "Hello, Orville."

"Jewel, Jewel. Why?"

"Because of what you and Pop done to Lorand."

"We didn't do nothing to Lorand. Leastways, I didn't. Why, I tried all I could to save Lorand when we found him overdosed—"

"Stop lying, Orvile. Save your breath and my patience. I know what happened. It's all on audiotape Lorand was recording on when you and Pop zombied him. So it's no use telling a story."

"Jewel, can't we—"

"No, we can't. Now hush up and listen. The audiotape of the zombieing and the videotape of the *ac*-cident are in a sealed envelope in my lawyer's safe. So if you know what's good for you, you'll put a lot of distance between you and Fanfair. Understand?"

A long pause, then: "Yes, Jewel."

"That's using your head. Good-bye, Orville."

Old Sally dished out Jewel's breakfast, then stood, hands on hips, eyeing her.

"You playing with your food worse'n Junior."

Jewel looked up with a wan smile. "Sorry, Sally. You know it ain't your cooking; it's my appetite."

Old Sally nodded. "Got to be. What's wrong, honey? Sorrowing over poor Pop?"

Jewel stared blankly. Despite the wee-hours visit from the police, Pop's death was the farthest thing from her mind; just now she had been thinking about Lorand. She brought Pop into focus. They had come to notify her of his death, and had accepted the story that she had followed Pop a few miles till she was satisfied he had control of his senses and the car, and

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had assured her it wasn't her fault that the liquor had hit him when it did.

She gave Old Sally a sad look. "I can't help blaming myself."

"Don't be foolish, woman. You can't help what somebody else brings on hisself. Eat something, and you'll feel better."

Jewel sighed. "I guess you're right." She nibbled at a muffin, then took big bites. She did feel better.

After breakfast, and after seeing Junior dressed to go out for a walk on the estate with Old Sally, and after calling a security firm for a new chauffeur-bodyguard, Jewel put on her heaviest fur coat and went down to the walk-in freezer.

She pressed 037. The door of the cryogenic chamber swung open.

Jewel gave a start. Snowflake had rubbed against her legs.

Snowflake seemed to be almost kittenish. Coldness put snap and sparkle into the air, gave it electricity, stepped up Snowflake's alertness and curiosity. Snowflake reached past Jewel to test the cold floor with a paw.

"No, you stay out here, Snowflake. One cool cat in there is enough."

Snowflake couldn't hear the words, but did sense the thought. Snowflake raised head and tail in an arrogant catenary. If that was the way she felt about it.... Besides, the one touch of coldness had changed his mind. Sometimes it was satisfying to be forbidden what you really didn't want. He stalked out into a warmer and more welcoming world. If that entailed the risk of a chase by a snotty human child, so be it.

Jewel watched Snowflake go, then turned to look at the cylinder. It drew her to it. She sleeved rime from the window and peered through the blur.

Lorand.

She felt a stirring of love. She had only to order a careful thawing to bring him back to life, to her, to things as they had been. She touched her fingers to her lips and then to the glass above Lorand's lips.

"So long, Lorand."

She turned and left. Lorand would not let her grow up. He would insist on having the final say about everything. She had to grow up on her own.

The time to thaw Lorand would be after she had matured and become worldly wise; after she had become mistress of herself and conservator of his empire; and after she had raised Junior to be a good, kind, and loving man. At such a time, she would bring Lorand back to life. Then they would be in phase, in true harmony — once Lorand grew up to match her new maturity.

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This is the first U.S. appearance of one of Australia's top SF writers. Terry Dowling teaches a Communications course at a large Sydney college. He is a musician, was an editor of THE ESSENTIAL ELLISON, and is the only writer to have won six of Australia's "Ditmar" Awards for Best Fiction.

Shatterwrack at Breaklight

By Terry Dowling

THERE ARE DUST-DEVILS at Twilight Beach. You can see them at sunset when the hot winds from the desert meet the cool ocean breezes, especially along the Promenade and terraces of the Gaza Hotel and down in the streets of the town.

They sometimes spin their playful dance in among the guests, much to the annoyance of the players of fire-chess. There is a rule that the vagaries of wind and weather are fair contest, and many a world-famous player has cried out in dismay during a crucial move when a queen or knight has had its small flame suddenly extinguished by a devil slipping in unnoticed amid the tables.

Some players even employ Devil Catchers rather than risk this happening, liveried or tuxedoed youths who stand about holding long-handled spoilers, watching and waiting.

I can remember once Alexander Carlos staring down dumbfounded at his debased queen on just such an occasion, as if unable to comprehend what had happened. Then he had leapt to his feet and in a rage had gone

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racing along the terrace after the little funnel of air, beating it with his fists, rushing through it back and forth, literally tearing it apart.

Player's temperament aside, Carlos gained himself a new reputation that evening. Xerxes may have whipped the Hellespont for sinking his bridge of ships, but Alexander Carlos had murdered his dust-devil at Twilight Beach.

The dust-devils come at twilight, as we sand-ship sailors do. The devils, the sailors, and — as if enjoying the risk and tempting fate — the players of fire-chess. I had left Rim at Trimori's and had decided on a walk down through the town, along the streets leading away from the Gaza and the ocean.

The streets there are quiet and refreshingly cool. The little intersections were set with lanterns that swayed and flickered in the breeze, and now and then in the wash of warm light under those yellow paper cages I could see a devil leap up to dance and die or spin off about its mischief.

You can't watch those devils too long. They make a philosopher out of you. All that sudden giddy vitality. Like watching a butterfly going past, desperate to be anywhere.

No sooner had I received my coffee at my usual table at Sailmaker's than breaklight was on the town. The sun had gone down, there was the brief time of stillness, then up came the sudden flood of golden light.

If one thing can be said to govern life in Twilight Beach, that is it. Tourists and locals alike set their day by it. How must I order my affairs to be back at the Gaza for the breaklight?

All around me people sat rapt, or came out on their balconies to watch. Then, when it was fully on us for its long hour, conversations began again. A guitar resumed its playing; even the wind-chimes rang out their tinkling song.

I watched the sky for another 10 minutes, then began walking. The streets were rather empty. I was down behind the breaklight if anything, down in the bowl of darkening air that cradled the town, so that there was a ragged skyline of rooftops against the effulgence.

I was reveling in the sweet melancholy of it all, with a *déjà-vu* brought on by the fragrances from nearby gardens and a snatch of song that had taken my thoughts.

Then I saw her.

A mirror woman walking toward me across the square.

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I saw her by the strange luminosity these projections have, and she was beautiful, strikingly beautiful, with high cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes and a slender neck, her golden hair partly gathered up, only to be sent cascading down her back and along her shoulders, in glorious contrast to her gown of crimson-black.

I stood where I was in the middle of the square, captivated by the image.

"Come away!" a voice said at my elbow, from an old man I had not previously noticed. He had a cruel scar down one cheek. "You don't need that."

But it was too late.

"Hello," the mirror woman said. "I am Seianne. I was hoping to find you."

"Tom," I said. And again, with a nervousness that surprised me: "Tom."

"I know, Tom. I watched for you tonight."

"I don't believe that."

"But it's true. If I can afford this image, don't you think I would know when a particular person was coming . . . Captain of the *Rynosseros*? I've been looking for you."

I stared at her. At those eyes, at her breasts, at her hair, radiant by breaklight and at any hour, I knew.

"You're too beautiful," I said. "You're using subliminals!"

The enantiomorph laughed, a lovely clear free sound, one more cliché trait to add to the list. "No. No. No. That would spoil it, Tom. If nothing else, this is for me. For itself. You're just noticing things more clearly. Walk with me. I only have the hour."

So we walked and she took my arm. The pressure of her hand was light, feather light, but still real enough.

I was entranced. In spite of what I knew about these projections, I was captivated. And curious, too.

"If you're wondering, Tom, yes, you can kiss me."

I felt a stab of alarm. How could this beautiful ghost-woman know my thoughts?

"Then. . . ."

"Yes. That too in a way. But later. On another evening perhaps."

We were together for the hour of the breaklight, from after sunset until full night.

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First, we walked back toward the Gaza, close to Trimori's, though I would have hated to have Rim see me with a phantom. People watched us as it was, fascinated by the gently-glowing figure at my side.

I avoided the terraces and the Promenade, but took her close by the seawall to a little place I know called Amberlin's. I had a margarita and she had nothing. She smiled at me when she refused my offer, saying she wanted a clear head. This projection had a sense of the absurd.

We sat looking out at the ocean. Most of the other patrons gave us looks, of sympathy or envy or a mixture of both, then ignored us. We became like any other couple, two people getting to know one another.

I kept telling myself that men and women are no more present than they are willing to be, and that Seianne was probably as much with me as this projection as any of the women sitting there in the flesh at the nearby tables were with their partners.

That's what I told myself, and I needed to believe it then.

But I asked her about it just the same, as much to hear her speak as anything.

"Why like this, Seianne?"

My companion shrugged. "It's probably the romance of it," she said. "And the risk. At any moment I could vanish on you."

"No more than I can," I said, aiming my words at the woman beyond the phantom.

"Oh?"

"In the end, you have no more power over me than I have over you. I can get up and leave you sitting here. That's just like turning you off."

"But you won't," Seianne said.

"No. Not yet. But I can. And you would have no more hold on me than I can have on you."

Her eyes flashed with excitement.

"Except that there's more to it. You spoke of power. Some men have grown desperate for this image you see, and none of their passion or determination has stopped it vanishing. There are even some who still ache to have me, who go to great pains to disguise it, and who say I'm cruel. They, too, will say they have walked away, but they haven't gone a single step."

"Is that what you intend for me, Seianne?"

"Are you desperate for me yet, Tom?"

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And we both smiled, delighting in the game that passion is, and in the freedoms and caution that we yearn to lose or trade — the traps of belonging.

I looked into those too perfect eyes, considering the possibilities for Seianne.

"You could be an old woman behind this mask."

"Or just a plain lonely woman — tired of losing. I really am too beautiful, aren't I?"

"Yes. Or a man keeping alive the memory of a lost love, a wife, a daughter. Using a recording."

"True. Or a man wanting to be a woman. His own anima."

"So?" I asked.

"For now," Seianne said, "I will answer you with an evasion that is important to me."

"And this is?"

"The one thing a woman cannot remain in her dealings with a man is a stranger — an alternative to herself. The man reaches the point where he believes he knows her. He doesn't, of course, but men have this mechanism in them that makes them *feel* they do. They so often fall in love with the idea of Woman in a woman, and go on to pursue the magic somewhere else. I've possibly found a way to deal with that, which could be why you see me like this."

"But isn't it transitory, Seianne? Superficial? Don't you want more?"

"How do you know I don't have more already, Tom? You see, you do keep idealising, making me more — or less — than a real person."

I did not press the topic any further. As the hour drew to its end, we walked back to the square near Sailmaker's, still arm in arm, with her talking softly and me thoroughly beguiled in spite of everything I knew.

"Tell me," I began, when we were down in the streets of the town. "When can I meet your. . . ?"

"No, Tom!" she said. "First you must bring me something."

"What?" I said, knowing how the principals of these images usually operated, the fees they demanded.

Her answer rather surprised me. Not money. Not rare woods or antiques.

"Shatterwrack!" she said.

"What?"

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"Bring me shatterwrack," she said.

And she turned and walked away, so much flickering ghost-light between the buildings.

I went to follow, but stopped. If Seianne's principal — the real Seianne — were nearby watching from one of these buildings or a neighboring villa, then she might in fact kill the image, deprive me of contact ever again. I would never meet the real Seianne, never again see even this mirror of her face, as false or enhanced as it might be.

So I stood there and considered what I had brought on myself. One of Twilight Beach's oldest tricks.

To make it worse, the old man with the scar was there.

"Hooked, ain't ya?" he said.

But I ignored him, heading back to the Gaza and Trimori's under a black sky and too many stars.

Rim saw I was distracted but kept his questions to himself as we walked down the Promenade from Trimori's. The ocean broke on our right; there were belltrees and chimes sounding all along the shore; a few tidal bells echoing them from the shallows.

He had concluded business for us and had some bills of lading for a new cargo we were to ferry out to Cobb's Platform.

"Can you handle it without me, Rim?" I said. "I need a few days lay-over."

"Sure, Tom," Rim said. "Anything I can do?"

"Thanks, no. I just need time."

Rim considered that, then nodded.

"We'll be back in six days," he said. "Or seven. See you at Amberlin's or Gencardi's."

"At Amberlin's," I said, and watched Rim turn his back on the sea, watched him heading for the sand-ship moorings.

Then I went looking.

There are probably 30 cars in all of Twilight Beach, only 30; probably 17 more during the summer when the villas overlooking the sea are occupied for the season.

There are few accidents, few chances to obtain shatterwrack in the obvious way.

I needed Cooney and in a hurry, before Seianne changed her required

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love-token, before she demanded something even more difficult to obtain.

I walked out on to the Pier, heading for the amusement concessions and brightly-lit kiosks at the far end. There were a lot of people about. The air was filled with laughter and singing, the voices of barkers and hucksters, the shouts of children, the smells of food cooking and incense and the sea.

But Cooney's place was shut and no one knew when he'd be back.

I wasted an hour gazing out at the dark water, thinking about my situation — wasted because Cooney didn't turn up and I came to no conclusions.

I knew how foolish I was being, that my ghost was enhanced or a Corpse Mask — the lamia face for some aging soul. If I wanted, I could make my way back to the *Rynosseros* and sail out with the others at first light, out to Cobb's Platform. Nothing would be said.

But all I could think of was Seianne and shatterwrack and the phantom touch of an arm through mine. The thought of being away from Twilight Beach just now was unbearable.

I studied the dark sea, then went back to the Gaza and took a room for the night, Room 777 when it is available, one up on the Number of the Beast.

THE NEXT morning I returned to the Pier, crossing the bleached boards above the bright ocean to Cooney's.

His neat little shop-studio was still closed, but a hand at one of the adjoining concessions told me Cooney would be at the Astronomer's Bar later that morning.

So I went to the Astronomer's Bar, one of the Gaza's most popular tourist spots, fitted out with a planetarium star-sky and big windows and models of early NASA probes.

Even at midmorning, the bar was crowded under the star-sky. There were businessmen, tourists, chess-players, professional dreamlocks, the captains of charvolants and their crews, two or three mirage divers, Ab'Os sleek with haldane presence, even a few astronomers from the local observatory. And the merchant of shatterwrack sitting in his corner.

I approached the bald man. His paid woman recognized me and moved away.

"Ahhh!" the man said, identifying me by my fatigues. "What'd you

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do that for, Cap'n? I hate you already."

"Hate me less, Cooney," I said, smiling and producing money. "I'm a customer."

An unctuous grin split the merchant's face, then faded as more of the man's true nature came back behind the eyes. And there was the spiel.

"So you want shatterwrack. Hard to get now, you know. Getting rarer all the time. It'll cost you, Cap'n."

"For instance?"

Cooney took out a small cloth pouch, balanced it in his palm and shook it. He named a price, ridiculously high.

"A pouch of gems or river pebbles can sound the same," I said.

Cooney loosened the drawstring and poured some of the little cubes and prisms out on the table.

"Shatterwrack!" the merchant said, scooping up the bright pieces. "Rolls Royce!"

"Forget the pitch, Cooney," I told him. "Just so it's genuine."

I gave him the money, took the pouch and the affadavit for it and went to go.

"Cap'n!" Cooney called. "A question!"

Every trace of the bald man's former bluff manner had disappeared. I went back to the table and waited.

"Yes?"

"Is it Seianne?

"Yes, it's Seianne. Do you know her?"

"Yes, Cap'n. Know of her. People come in from time to time. Why she wants shatterwrack I'll never know. She teases, Cap'n. I've followed her image in the streets, and I've gone up to her with shatterwrack in me fists, hot and begging, and she's just said, "No, it's not you I want!"

"So why me, Cooney? Why me?"

"Who knows why? Why not? She fancies you, I'd say. It's your turn. You know about the ones who use projections. They're Corpse Masks. Or high-class whores who send out walkin' talkin' advertisements for themselves. You fall in love, then pay dearly for the privilege of the real thing. In money or love-tokens." He gestured at the pouch I was holding. "Otherwise you chase a ghost. Oh, I know. Some folks want to think they're sent by the wealthy young ladies from the villas, or tourists here on a spree. Famous women. Celebrities here for the ultimate dalliance. But

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most of the time you never meet the principal, take it from me. You just spend a few evenin's with a ghost and it's over."

"You love her that much, Cooney?"

"For near on three years, Cap'n. I've watched her image walkin' the town, wondering which villa she was in. But I'm wiser'n you."

"How's that?"

"I don't go lookin' anymore. Never at breaklight."

I didn't have Cooney's wisdom. I sat on the terrace during the afternoon, drinking cold tea and waiting for sunset. At five o'clock I went back to the Astronomer's Bar but Cooney wasn't there, so I wandered down to the Time Beaches and strolled past the sand-clocks and the wind-clocks and did a long detour through the seagrass up to the Promenade.

For the last 15 minutes, I watched the players at their flickering boards, set and lost a passing bet with a Niuginian Devil Catcher about a willy-willy that looked like menacing two of them, then headed for the avenues leading down into the town.

As I was walking away from the Gaza, the sun slipped below the horizon, there was a lull, then the breaklight flared up the sky. A few of the brighter stars appeared.

I went to Sailmaker's, crossed the square, repeating the events of the previous night.

Another part of that evening was repeated too. As I stood waiting for my ghost, I noticed the old man watching me from a nearby table. His scar was an opalescent smile down his lined face.

There were too many mysteries, and this was one I didn't care for. I felt like speaking to him, asking him what he meant by his words the night before, but Seianne's image appeared at the edge of the square, following its set path, and I missed my chance.

"You came," she said.

"You knew I would," I replied, holding out the small pouch.

The image reached out and took it. I knew only a little about these high resolution enantiomorphs, but she was able to do so and it surprised me.

"No, I wasn't sure you'd come, Tom. But I'm glad you decided to."

Then she took my arm and we walked.

There are several places in Twilight Beach I love more than the rest. Sailmaker's is one, and Amberlin's. Then there is The Traitor's Face and

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The Slow Hour. I took Seianne to the Hour. We pretended to dine (I had something), then we went back to my room at the Gaza where we sat on the balcony, talking and watching the sea, and I felt just a little of how it would be to have the real Seianne.

But then knowing that Seianne's principal was, in a sense, right there controlling her image — sitting before the sensorium in a villa somewhere — I felt vulnerable, at a ridiculous disadvantage.

"I want to see you, Seianne. Meet you." (I wondered how many other men had said those words.)

The image regarded me, but in an oddly abstracted way, as if thinking, as if the idea that I did not see her as a person was an affrontery.

"You might be disappointed," she said.

"Not by what I see and know and feel," I told her, and paused. "Please!" It was the hardest word I'd ever had to say.

"Tomorrow," the ghost of Seianne said, and moved to the door.

I had no choice but to accept what she offered.

We walked together, down to the square with its paper lanterns and soft music.

"Tomorrow then," I said, wanting to be sure. "At breaklight."

Seianne gave a wistful smile.

"Yes. Tomorrow," she said. "And Tom?"

I waited for her words.

"Bring me shatterwrack!"

The ghost walked off amid the eddies of air that were forming, and the night came down and I was left deeply troubled in my captivity and my folly.

The next day I spent better than the first. The odd feeling of disquiet, of annoyance, I had felt grew stronger, warning me off, telling me that when a game goes past a certain point, then the playing is more important than any thought of ending the game.

The second request for shatterwrack worried me that much. It was too much a condition, a price of admission. I half-expected Cooney to be out of town, so I would be left without a supply, disqualified, out of the game.

But the merchant was there in his shop on the Pier when I rushed in. And he had shatterwrack. Two bags. I bought both.

"Mercedes-Benz, Cap'n!" he assured me. "The best quality. The very best."

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I handed over the money, took the small bags and the affidavits, more self-conscious than the last time, and so aware of how obsessed and caught I was.

"Sure, Cooney, I hear you."

And I went back to the town. I made inquiries about Seianne at the Gaza, at Gencardi's, at other places in Twilight Beach, even trying the different retrieval systems at the Library.

By midday I thought I had my answer.

Seven car accidents were recorded for Twilight Beach in the last 50 years, none of the parties involved listed, but the most recent only four years ago.

I thought I had it.

My lovely Seianne had probably been injured in that last accident, scarred or maimed in some way. Confined to a wheelchair perhaps, left with no alternative but to buy a sensorium, to send her cosmetically-enhanced image out walking the town looking for lovers.

Looking, finding and testing them. The perfect lamia.

There was the irony of it — Seianne seeking the very shatterwrack that may have scarred her in that accident. At the time of day when the incident had occurred. Breaklight. I smiled at the word-play. A part of a car was called that.

I keyed in my requests, learned more and more that supported my argument. Then, shortly after noon, when the town was quiet and the bright streets were virtually empty under the hot sun, I went down to Sailmaker's to find the scarred man.

My theory had accommodated him too. He was cast as the chauffeur of Seianne's vehicle in the drama I was re-creating, possibly dismissed after the incident, blamed for spoiling his mistress's beauty, cut off, the one held responsible for dooming her to her less respectable form of hunting.

The square was what convinced me I was right. Names weren't listed but places were. Several of the accidents had occurred near Sailmaker's, where the streets were wide enough to allow turns at greater speeds than usual. The crash four years ago had been one of them.

The proprietor of Sailmaker's told me that the old man, Clive Appia, had in fact been a chauffeur once, and that now he cleaned the clocks down at the sculpture garden on the beach below the Gaza.

But as his story was coming together, Clive Appia was — perversely —

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nowhere to be found, not at the clocks on the Time Beaches, not at his small apartment on Bent Street.

The concierge there let me see his room. I'd never before used my status as a State of Nation ship's captain quite this way, to unlock doors, but I had to know. Clive Appia had once been a chauffeur. He could have been at the wheel of Seianne's car that evening, or even — it suddenly occurred to me — at the wheel of the other vehicle in the accident.

Or he could be an innocent in all this.

I had to know.

And sure enough, by the man's bed was a framed photograph of Seianne, showing her smiling, unscarred, exactly as she was in her projection.

I thought I had it. I thought I had it all.

That evening, I was waiting below the Gaza, down at the corner of the square in the darkening town.

Breaklight came with its usual sad glory, and the sky became a wash of golden light, stained into the richest blue overhead, stained further back into creeping indigo and growing black.

This time, no projection emerged between the buildings. As the light streamed up the sky, a black limousine pulled into the square and stopped.

At last, I thought. Seianne.

But when the young uniformed chauffeur got out and opened the rear passenger door, it was no disfigured socialite who appeared. It was the mirror woman once again, glowing softly, moving toward me over the stones.

The game — the evasion — continued. The infernal playing.

But I waited, clutching my shatterwrack, in case the ghost had come to lead me back to her principal, back to the person I assumed was waiting in the car, a bright shadow playing psychopomp.

The doppelganger drew near and stopped.

"Hello, Tom. Is that for me?"

"This? Well, yes. But for the real Seianne. Is she there?"

I stood clutching my bags and looking beyond her to the car, though I couldn't make out anything at this distance, just the chauffeur waiting by the door.

"Do you love me, Tom?" the image asked.

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"I don't know. I could."

"But?"

"You know why. You're not real."

The ghost-Seianne smiled, a forlorn utterly sad smile.

"In a way I'm more real than the Seianne waiting over there."

And, again, I thought I knew it all.

"I know you've been in a car accident, Seianne. Here, four years ago. I know you've been scarred, that you don't like to be seen. But I need the truth. Let me have the truth. End the game!"

A puzzled look crossed the projection's glowing face, or rather a look of doubt mixed with understanding. It told me that Seianne had no plan, that she was here against her better judgment, just as I was.

"Oh, Tom," the phantom said. "End the game! It's not as easy as that. There's so much to lose. I'm such a very special ghost."

Then, suddenly, there was movement. A figure rushed out into the square, branishing a gun and shouting — shouting words I could not make out except for a name, a single name.

For an incredible second I thought the newcomer was Cooney, here to show his own thwarted love in a final brutal display.

But no. It was the old man, Clive Appia, stumbling along, heading toward the car.

The chauffeur came forward to stop him. Appia raised the gun and shot him through the heart. The gunshot echoed in the silence.

I drew my long-bladed sticker from my leg-sheath, glad I had it there, the deadly all-purpose friend of the sand-ship sailor.

Appia fired the gun again, and again, hitting the windscreen, the side windows. Fired a fourth time.

Shatterwrack!

Shatterwrack everywhere!

Then my narrow blade was in the air and in the old man's back. He sank to the stones with a soft cry.

Beside me, Seianne — the image-Seianne — gave a low cry of her own and seemed to flicker. I went to help her, then realized my error and ran across to the car instead.

I peered into the back, saw the old woman, the old, terribly old woman, collapsing out of the cowl of a portable sensorium fitted to the edge of the seat. Blood trickled from a gunshot wound in her chest. Her eyes focused

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on me and she tried to speak. With the last essence of her life she tried, but the words remained unsounded.

Finally she let her head and shoulders slump forward into the cowl of the sender, though I doubted she had the strength even for the image to speak more than a few words.

The beautiful Seianne was suddenly beside me, touching me.

"Don't hate me, Tom. I wouldn't have come if I didn't think you . . . I needed something more too. . . ." Her voice quavered and she paused. Then: "Not four years . . . 40! And Clive . . . he. . . ." Tears and pain registered on the lovely, too perfect face. "Poor Clive. . . ."

The hand on my arm flickered and dimmed. The feather-touch was gone.

Seianne died. Both of them — though my fool's vision, my dream-Seianne, remained, and would remain, somewhere.

In the square, there was an emptiness, a silence, in spite of the people who had gathered, in spite of the flaring curtain of light. As if drawn to the silence, two dust devils appeared, skipping, dancing past.

I looked from the two dead men to the withered shape in the back seat of the car — this woman drawn by the risk of playing her game this one time too close to the real world. Playing it as close as she dared and drawn into that game's end.

I had deceived myself so much more than she had ever deceived me. But now I was wise again. I recalled how it so often was with reality and mirrors. Opposites. Distortions. The bright deceptions.

All about me now.

Not shatterwrack. Not breaklight.

Just broken glass at sunset.

(from page 55)

winged girl burned up with him, clasped in his arms in midair." He smiled in amusement at human legends.

"The tale is true," Ileya said. "How can I be that girl? She burned with him." She turned away from the magical host and walked into the silent, dark forest.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

SMASHING THE SKY

WHEN I was a very young lad — I couldn't have been more than seven at the time — I found a map of Greater New York. I had never seen a map before, and I hadn't the faintest notion what it was.

There were curious shapes, and there were lines crossing here and there and small print everywhere. However, as I studied it with puzzlement and curiosity, I came across some fairly large print which said: BROOKLYN.

That excited me. After all, I knew that we lived in Brooklyn. The common conversation I heard from grownups about me made it clear that Brooklyn was home. I therefore looked eagerly for other words that made sense, and eventually I discovered the names of streets that were familiar to me.

I remember the feeling of awe and gladness that I experienced. After all, my horizon was very close to my center, and I hadn't the faintest idea what lay beyond it. I therefore strongly suspected that the map I had, which listed the streets I knew and many, many that I didn't know in dim, far away places like Queens and Manhattan, must be a guide to the whole world — even the whole Universe.

I soon learned better, for in school I eventually received geography books with maps covering more ground, and I found that Brooklyn and even all the five boroughs of Greater New York were but an insignificant patch on an inconceivably larger world.

I felt the loss. For a brief period of time I thought I had a clear representation of everything there was, and that my knowledge was (at least potentially) total. To be introduced to misty distances plunged me into a rather fearful unknown.

But what I went through in my first decade, all of humanity went

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through over an enormous stretch of time (as I described in DEAD CENTER, F&SF, April 1983, in which I covered some of the material in this essay from a different perspective). The night sky seemed to humanity a representation of everything there was, except for the solid Earth itself, and it was accepted as "all-there-is" with the same confidence that I accepted the map of New York as representing "all-there-is."

There were, of course, clouds, weather manifestations, shooting stars, and comets to be seen in the sky, but they were taken to be merely atmospheric manifestations. There were also the Sun, the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, and Saturn, the seven "planets," which steadily shifted position relative to each other and to all the other stars. These were considered to exist between the Earth and the sky itself.

Aside from atmospheric manifestations and the seven planets, everything else was "sky." The sky in early times was viewed as a smoothly curved object, made of some thin solid material, and in the Bible it is called the "firmament," with that first syllable an indication that it was viewed as composed of something "firm" and solid. The word is Latin and it is a translation from the Greek "stereoma," meaning a solid dome, and that in turn is a translation from the Hebrew "rakia," meaning a thin, metallic sheet.

To the unsophisticated Biblical writers, the sky seemed a small and rather intimate semi-spherical solid dome that covered the flat Earth, coming down to meet it all around the horizon. Thus, when the Book of Revelation (written about A.D. 90) speaks of the destruction of Earth and sky, it says, "And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth... And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together" (Revelation 6:13-14). In other words, the thin metal out of which the sky was formed rolled up (spro-o-o-ing), and all the spangly little lights that had covered it fell off.

I would not be surprised if many millions of people on Earth had this same view of the sky and the stars at this very moment.

To the Biblical writers, the stars seemed innumerable, too, so that when God wants to tell Abram (later, Abraham) how many descendants he will have, "he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell [count] the stars, if thou be able to number them... So shall thy seed be." (Genesis 15:5).

Actually, however, the total number of stars visible to the normal eye is no more than 6,000. Only half of them are above the horizon at any one time, and the dimmer

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ones near the horizon are washed out by atmospheric effects even when the sky is completely clear. Therefore, the number of stars Abram could have seen was no more than about 2500.

The Greek philosophers, as early as 500 B.C., were beginning to gather that Earth was a sphere. They viewed the sky as a large and perfect sphere at the center of which the spherical Earth was suspended. But even to them, the sky was a *solid* sphere, black by night and blue by day, and the stars, visible by night only, were tiny luminous dots attached to the solid sky.

In their view, the sphere turned steadily about the Earth, completing one turn in twenty-four hours. The motion of the sky itself could not be seen, but the stars moved relative to the horizon and did so "all in a piece" as one would expect if they were all affixed to a solid dome. The stars were therefore called the "fixed stars," as opposed to the various "planets," which is from a Greek phrase meaning "wandering stars."

This was a grandly simple view, and prior to modern times there were only a few people who tried to add anything significant to it. The Greek philosopher Democritus of Abdera (470-380 B.C.) maintained that the Milky Way consisted of numerous stars, too small to be seen individually, so that they melted into a kind of luminous fog.

The Milky Way was the only visible object affixed to the sky that did not resemble the tiny stars. Democritus's attempt to make it fit the other objects in the sky, and thus simplify the picture of the Universe, lacked evidence and was therefore not "compelling." It didn't force belief. It was much easier to believe that the Milky Way was, in actual fact, exactly what it appeared to be — a luminous fog. Besides, the Milky Way might be either a multitudinous crowd of stars or a luminous fog, but in either case, it did not disturb the picture of the sky as a solid sphere.

A much more revolutionary view was presented by a German scholar, Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464). A book he published in 1440 claimed the following: Space was infinite and contained an infinite number of objects like our own Sun, each one shining over inhabited worlds, as our Sun did. The Suns were so far away that we saw them only as tiny objects — stars — and we saw only a few of them, since most were too far away to be seen at all.

It was a brilliant speculation that for the first time suggested that the sky was not a solid object, but that in its place there was merely infinite space. Again, there was

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no evidence, and the view was not compelling in itself. People preferred to believe that the stars were exactly what they seemed to be — little flecks of light affixed to a solid sky.

To be sure, a century and a half later, an Italian scholar, Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), picked up Nicholas's ideas and trumpeted them forth. He was a lot less tactful than Nicholas, and times had grown a lot less tolerant. Therefore, whereas Nicholas died in his bed in the odor of sanctity as a cardinal of the Church, poor Bruno was burned at the stake.

In another direction altogether, a Greek astronomer, Aristarchus of Samos (310-230 B.C.), had maintained about 260 B.C. that it made more sense to suppose that the planets, including Earth, revolved about the Sun (a "heliocentric" view), rather than to suppose that they, including the Sun, revolved about the Earth (a "geocentric" view). This was still a third non-compelling speculation that was not accepted because it went against appearances.

In 1543, a Polish astronomer, Nicolas Copernicus (1473-1543), picked up the Aristarchean speculation and pointed out that while there was no compelling evidence for it, the heliocentric view made it easier to calculate the past and future motion of planets. That made it sound like a mathematical device and was not a truly compelling argument, so that for fifty years, the Copernican view failed to receive general acceptance.

Please notice, though, that substituting a heliocentric view for a geocentric one only affected Earth's immediate neighborhood. Even if the heliocentric view was adopted and the planets made up a "Solar system," as they circled "Sol" (the Latin word for the Sun), that did not necessarily affect the sphere of the sky. The sky might still be viewed as the same solid sphere it had always been thought to be, but one that had the Sun at its center rather than the Earth.

The heliocentric view became compelling, at last, when the Italian scientist Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) constructed a simple telescope and, in 1609, turned it on the sky.

To begin with, he found that there were stars that were too dim to be seen by the unaided eye in every direction he looked, and that the Milky Way, as Democritus had maintained, was made up innumerable very faint stars.

Then Galileo discovered the satellites of Jupiter and the phases of Venus, and that made it possible to adduce compelling arguments in favor of the heliocentric view. Galileo was himself forced to retract his

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arguments, under the threat of torture by the Inquisition, but astronomers generally were converted to heliocentrism.

This meant that the sky didn't really turn from east to west. It was the Earth that turned from west to east. Yet that didn't affect the nature of the sky, either. It was still a solid sphere, black by night and blue by day, motionless rather than turning, and enclosing the Sun at its center rather than the Earth. It was still that old, familiar solid star-spangled structure.

Also, in 1609, the German astronomer Johann Kepler (1571-1630) maintained that planetary orbits were not circles, or combinations of circles, as everyone from the Greeks to Galileo had thought, but were ellipses, instead. Kepler worked out the actual shape of the Solar system and was able to show the relative distance of the planets from Earth and from each other. And that didn't necessarily affect the nature of the sky, either.

In 1672, the Italian-French astronomer Giovanni Domenico Cassini (1625-1673), working in Paris, was able, with the help of a French astronomer, Jean Richer (1630-1696), in French Guiana, to get the first reliable measurement indicating the scale of the Solar system. It turned out to be far, far larger than anyone had imagined. The orbit of Saturn, then the farthest known planet, was something like 3 billion kilometers in diameter.

Yet that didn't necessarily change the nature of the sky, either. It was a far huger sphere than had been thought, with a diameter not measured in mere miles as the Biblical writers had thought, or in thousands of miles as the early Greek philosophers had thought, or in millions of miles as Galileo and Kepler might have thought, but in *billions* of miles. Yet even though it had grown so monstrous, it might still be the same solid, star-spangled sphere.

In 1718, however, the English astronomer Edmund Halley (1656-1742) was checking the position of the various stars in order to prepare a new star map, and he found that three bright stars, Sirius, Procyon and Arcturus, had changed their positions (relative to the general run of dimmer stars) significantly since the time of the ancient Greeks.

From this he concluded that the stars were not "fixed" after all, but moved relative to each other. It was just that they moved so slowly that the changes in position became unmistakable only after they had been moving for hundreds or even thousands of years.

But why should the stars move so slowly, when they did move, and

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why did most of the stars not appear to move at all? To Halley, it seemed that the stars must be so enormously far away that their motions *seemed* slow. In fact, only the very nearest of the stars would have visible motions even after many centuries. Stars that were still farther distant would show no visible movement even in the course of all the time that human beings had been observing the sky.

But if one assumed the stars were so enormously far away, surely one must turn to the speculations of Nicholas of Cusa nearly three centuries earlier. The stars must be Suns. Suppose the star Sirius, for instance, was as luminous as our Sun is. How far off would it have to be before its enormous luminosity would seem brighter than its apparent brightness as a star. Halley calculated what that distance would be and ended with the decision that (to use our modern system of measurement) Sirius must be about 2 light-years away from us.

Halley was the first person to speak of the distance of the stars in terms of light-years and thus to suppose that if there were indeed such a thing as a solid sky-sphere, it would have to be *trillions* of kilometers in diameter.

Yet Halley's arguments weren't compelling either. It might be that the stars were as dim as they were because they were comparatively close and *really* dim, and not because they were far away Suns. It might be that a few of them drifted very slowly across the solid surface of the sky because they were not completely fixed, but could shift a bit, very slowly. In that case, the sky would be much closer to Earth than Halley's speculations would lead one to believe.

Some direct and indisputable measurement of stellar distances was required, and astronomers knew how to do that, in theory. As the Earth swings from one side of its orbit to the other, it changes its position with respect to the surrounding stars by some 300 million kilometers. As it moves rightward in its orbit, the nearer stars seem to move leftward relative to the farther stars. This is "parallactic displacement."

The farther the stars, the tinier the parallactic displacement. If that displacement is large enough to be measured, however, then by knowing the diameter of Earth's orbit, you can calculate the distance of the star with a considerable degree of confidence.

When Copernicus first presented the heliocentric view, astronomers realized that the nearer stars ought to show parallactic displacement relative to the farther stars. From the fact that they didn't, it was ar-

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gued that Earth did not move. Copernicus, however, maintained that the stars were simply so distant that the parallactic displacement was immeasurably small — and Copernicus was right.

(Of course, whatever the distance of the stars, there would be no parallactic displacement if all were at the same distance, as they would have to be if they were affixed to the solid sphere of the sky.)

Eventually, telescopes were invented, and were steadily improved to the point where parallactic displacements far too small to have been seen earlier could be measured (if such displacements existed).

As it happened, they did, and the first to measure a parallactic displacement was the German astronomer Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel (1784-1846). In 1838, he announced the parallactic displacement of the star 61 Cygni, which turned out to be about 6 light-years away from us. In the next couple of years the distances of Alpha Centauri (4.3 light-years) and Vega (11 light-years) were determinded by other astronomers.

It was clear that the stars, even the nearest, were farther away than even Halley had thought, and that they were not all at the same distance, but were distributed through spaces so vast that one was drawn to Nicholas of Cusa's speculation of an infinite Universe.

So at last, the sky was smashed forever. There was no firmament, no solid sphere. Earth was surrounded only by space.

But now a new question arose. Are the stars really distributed through infinite space, equally in all directions, or is there some limit to their existence and do they form a finite grouping of some definite shape or other?

At first glance, the answer seems to be the one Nicholas of Cusa gave. If we look at the sky with a telescope, there are stars in every direction. The better the telescope, the more and dimmer (and, therefore, presumably, the more distant) the stars we see. It would seem that the Universe of stars forms a large spherical structure of enormous, and perhaps infinite, size.

There is only one catch to this, and that is that the distribution of the stars in the sky is not quite symmetrical. There is the Milky Way. If you look at any portion of the Milky Way, then you see an enormous number of very dim stars, a far greater number than you see in any portion of similar size anywhere else in the sky.

The first person to try to account for this asymmetry in the sky was a British astronomer, Thomas Wright (1711-1786). In 1750, after Halley's

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suggestion that the stars must be distributed through indefinite space, but before Bessel's (and others) confirmation of that, Wright worked up a mystical structure of the starry Universe as existing between two concentric spheres, with God and Heaven existing inside the smaller sphere. If you looked directly toward the inner or outer boundary of the starry realm, you would see relatively few stars. If you looked at right angles to that, through a long stretch of the star-filled in-between layer, you saw innumerable dim stars — the Milky Way.

The German scholar Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) picked up Wright's notion in 1755, and either misunderstood it or modified it. He got rid of the mystical elements and felt that the star system was lens shaped. The Sun was at the center and, depending on whether one looked through the thin dimension or the thick one, one saw a scattering of the stars — or the Milky Way.

Both Wright and Kant were speculating, however, and did not make the kind of measurements that would make those speculations compelling. What was needed was supplied by the German-British astronomer William Herschel (1738-1822).

Beginning in 1785, Herschel actually counted the stars in the sky, not only those visible to the unaided eye, but those he could see in his telescope. It was impractical to try to count them all, so he marked out 683 small squares in the sky, distributing them as randomly as he could over the entire stretch of the sky visible to him. He then counted all the stars in each small square. In this way, Herschel took a poll of the heavens and founded the science of "statistical astronomy."

Herschel found that the number of stars in the various small squares increased steadily as one approached the Milky Way, and that the number was smallest in directions at right angles to the plane of the Milky Way.

This made it clear, by actual measurements, that Kant was right and that the star system was indeed lens shaped. What's more, by making some reasonable assumptions, Herschel came to some conclusions as to the size of the star system. He estimated that its long diameter extended for 8,000 light-years and its short diameter for 1,500 light-years, and that the whole contained 300 million stars.

This was a fearful underestimate, but it was the first time that the Universe was spoken of in terms of tens of quadrillions of kilometers. Since the Milky Way is the result of looking through the star system the long way, that star system came

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to be called the "Galaxy," from the Greek phrase for the Milky Way.

Herschel may therefore be said to have discovered the Galaxy.

Since the Milky Way seemed to be more or less equally bright everywhere, and since the circle of the Milky Way seemed to divide the sky into two equal halves, it seemed reasonable to suppose that the Sun was at, or near, the center of the Galaxy.

Yet it was not fixed immovably at the center, and Herschel himself demonstrated that fact. Beginning in 1783, Herschel did his best to determine just how the stars were slowly changing position in the sky. He could do this much better than Halley had been able to do, of course, for he had better instruments.

It turned out that the stars in one portion of the sky, in the constellations of Lyra and Hercules, seemed on the whole to be moving away from each other, as though a kind of ragged hole were opening up in that direction. On the opposite side of the sky, the stars on the whole seemed to be moving closer to each other, as though they were shutting a ragged hole.

This could be most easily explained by supposing that the Sun was moving in the Lyra/Hercules direction. In that case, the stars it approached would be spreading outward, and those from which it was receding would be closing together.

Herschel showed, therefore, that the Sun itself was moving just as the other stars were and that it was not the immovable center of the Universe, any more than the Earth was.

A century and a quarter after Herschel's time, the Dutch astronomer Jacobus Cornelis Kapteyn (1851-1922) undertook to repeat Herschel's work. By Kapteyn's time, telescopes had further improved, and even more important, photography had been invented. Kapteyn could take photographs of randomly selected portions of the sky, and then, at leisure, he could count the stars contained in the chosen squares.

In 1906, he confirmed Herschel's notions of the lens-shaped Galaxy, but found it to be considerably larger than Herschel had thought. By 1920, he estimated the Galaxy to be 55,000 light-years wide and 11,000 light-years thick.

However, the Milky Way remained equally bright all the way around the sky so that Kapteyn, like Herschel, felt the Sun was at or near the center of the Galaxy.

Kapteyn also repeated Herschel's work on the determination of the proper motion of the stars, to see what regularities he could find in it. Naturally, he could do much

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more refined work than Herschel had been able to do, and in 1904, he decided that the stars moved in two large streams. One stream moved in a particular direction, the other in a directly opposite direction.

Kapteyn's last student was the Dutch astronomer Jan Hendrik Oort (b. 1900), and he considered those two star streams. It seemed to Oort that the Galaxy, like other astronomical objects, ought to be turning about its center. Just as the various planets revolve about the Sun, why should not the Sun (and all the other stars) turn about the center of the Galaxy?

If so, the stars (like the Solar system's planets) might well all be turning about the Galaxy's center in the same direction. Nevertheless, those stars that were nearer the center ought to be moving more quickly than those stars farther from the center (just as planets near the Sun move more quickly than planets far from the Sun).

By Oort's time, the Herschel/-Kapteyn supposition that the Sun was at or near the center of the Galaxy had been shown to be incorrect (see OUT IN THE BOONDOCKS, F&SF, May 1983). The Sun, as was increasingly understood, was a considerable distance from the center of the Galaxy.

In that case, the Sun is circling the center of the Galaxy at some moderate speed, but the stars that happen to be closer to the center would be moving faster than the Sun and all would be racing ahead, to a greater or lesser extent. On the other hand, the stars that were farther from the center of the Galaxy would be moving more slowly than the Sun, and all would be lagging behind to a greater or lesser extent.

That would exactly account for Kapteyn's two streams that seemed to be moving in opposite directions.

Oort calculated that the Sun was moving about the Galactic center (which is about 30,000 light-years from us) in a fairly circular orbit at a speed of about 220 kilometers per second, relative to that center. This is about 7½ times as fast as the Earth moves about the Sun, relative to its center.

Nevertheless, of course, so mighty is the Sun's orbit about the Galactic center that it makes one turn about that center in 230 million years. That is a very long time, but not too long when compared with the duration, so far, of the Solar system. Since the Solar system was formed, it has travelled about the Galactic center nineteen times and is now making its twentieth circuit, assuming that its orbit and its orbital velocity has not changed significantly in all that time.

Probably it hasn't, for the stars are so far apart and move so slowly

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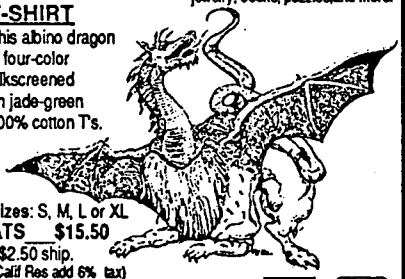
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in comparison to those enormous distances, that even if all the stars were moving randomly, the chances that our Sun, in our region of the Galaxy, would move close enough to another star to have its orbit significantly altered is very small. Since the stars are *not* moving randomly, but are all sweeping along in more or less the same direction, the chances of gravitational interference become even tinier.

This is a good thing, for if the Sun's orbit were altered in such a way as to make it distinctly elliptical, it might penetrate the inner regions of the Galaxy once every rotation (as a comet penetrates the inner Solar system once every rotation), and it would then find itself in a region of dangerous disturbances and radiation. The fact that we are all still here and that life has survived on this planet for well over three billion years is itself testimony to the regular and comparatively undisturbed way in which the Sun has been circling the Galactic center so far.

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Ronald Anthony Cross's latest story is about a man's life and the vision that guides it. It's a story that is not easily classified, but it is ultimately very moving, and it will reward your attention.

Every Trembling Blossom, Every Singing Bird

By Ronald Anthony Cross

I WAS ONLY A boy the first time the angel came to me. Some might have described me as a young man, but fact is, I didn't have enough maturity to be described that way. I was busily involved in the act of committing suicide. Nothing fancy, like jumping off a bridge or high building. Just Dad's gun.

Dad did love his guns, so I guess there's something to be said for the fact that at least he left the last one of them with me when he ran away from Mom and me, and didn't pawn it, like he did the others. In those days I would have liked to think so, but there was no way to really know. He didn't leave a note.

Mom had died awhile back, so there I was, all alone with my dad's gun. I had just cleaned and oiled it, as I did often, so it was ready to go.

It was an odd make of gun, a 1914 lever-action Savage, Model 99. Really

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it was a bit much for white-tail deer, which is what my dad had hunted with it.

"This here's a collector's item," my dad used to say. My dad, who came from Montana, had been a hunter, who never got any of whatever it was he was hunting. Here in Chicago he was more of a drinker. He got that.

Anyhow, there I was with the gun, bullet levered into the chamber, trying to figure how to reach the trigger when I put the gun in my mouth. It seemed to me that doing it with your toes was too undignified. I didn't want that. I sat there and thought of some strange Rube Goldberg devices that got stranger and stranger as my mind went on, charging along, trying to come up with something. Alarm goes off, scares mouse, which runs across trip wire, opening door of cage; mouse then runs outside. Cat jumps up and chases mouse. String tied from cat's tail to trigger of gun. — That sort of thing — only more elaborate.

I actually got to laughing and couldn't stop. After a while I got up and wandered over to the window. The tears of laughter were now tears of something else. Looking out the window didn't help. The grimy, scummy, smoky metallic city pressed in on me like a huge ramshackle machine that was about to collapse with me in the middle of it.

It seemed to me I was stuck here. Like the mouse in the cage in my mind with the cat waiting for it to come out. Not too funny. I couldn't see any way out of anything.

When I went back over to the bed, I meant business. Toes were good enough, to hell with dignity.

But the moment I sat down on the bed, I heard a loud whirring noise like a helicopter, growing louder and louder until it hurt my ears and I clamped my hands over them. But it came on and on, until suddenly, just when I couldn't bear it anymore, my ears popped, and there was a stunned silence, with only a distant ringing in my ears. Then the ringing died out and was replaced by a low roar, but this was still a part of this silence, if you understand what I mean.

The room began to stretch apart. I remember it slanting and then stretching out flat and narrow, and I could feel myself stretching out flat and wide in it, until suddenly everything popped again and I was nowhere, in nothing — not even black, not even gray.

A being I could not comprehend hovered there — more awful than beautiful to me, I might add.

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"I am what you think of as an angel," it said, not really needing to speak out loud. Its enormous thoughts felt like they were crushing my brain.

You must come with me, it thought. *Everything is the will of. . . .* The thought was not "God." But at the time I understood it. It was what people meant by God, but something more complex, multistructured, incomprehensible, moving on and on, yet at the same time remaining still, crushing and creating. No, it was not the will the angel served; it was omnipotent whim.

Questions surged into my mind.

I will answer, but you will not understand, the angel thought.

And it was true. My mind quieted, emptied. There was nothing I could ask that I would understand the answer to. There was nothing left to say.

Here, it shouted, and grabbed me somehow, and rushed me down an endless dark tunnel forever faster and faster — too fast to even scream — until suddenly we popped out into light.

Here, it thought, *here.*

I was in a garden. A southern garden. It was night. Warm spring or summer night. What I had thought was bright light was only full moon. But what a moon. Huge and plump as a ripe melon, it hung there etched by a myriad delicate lines and subtle shadings. A pale but glowing orange. Emanating its smoky rays into the black sky so that you could see an almost subliminal aura if you concentrated on it.

Sweet, rich smell of flowers wafted to me on the air, so sweet it made me giddy. Later, after some time of searching, I was to identify this as primarily honeysuckle, but honeysuckle in mass profusion, and mixed in with the odors of many other flowers.

A lone bird was singing, "Chirr ip, chirr ip, chirr ip," over and over. Then it shifted to "Whiril, whiril, whiril." It seemed to me that I could almost understand what it was saying; almost, but not quite, rather like the answers to the questions I had silently asked the angel.

It's the same, the angel thought, *exactly the same.*

Suddenly the back porch of a house materialized off to one side, or rather, I tuned in to it. It was one of those wide southern-style porches, with a trellis upon which pulsed and throbbed a predatory vine with huge blazing pink flowers, trying but unable to kill the trellis that it had attacked. Clematis. But I didn't know that then.

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An old man came out on the porch, moving somewhat stiffly yet spryly: he seemed to be the kind of guy who would figure out a style to hop along faster than you could walk, if you amputated his leg.

He peered out into the night and sniffed the air, then yawned and stretched. For a moment, it looked as if he were going to succumb to the spell of the garden, but then, quite shockingly, he slapped himself briskly in the face. "Goddamn mosquitoes," he shouted, turned around, and went back inside.

Now I tuned in to the high-pitched buzz of the mosquito's wings with what I suppose were my supertuned astral senses. And it seemed to me as that zooming whine cut through the warm night air, with the crickets and other insects supplying the steady chorus of background rhythm, that it was at once the richest and most mysterious of music: that everything that was worth knowing was in the whine of that mosquito.

Exactly, the angel thought.

Then I was moving. *Now,* the angel thought, *now.* I was floating along a path that led deeper into the garden. Floating past and through a profusion of rich and beautiful flowers. I could not see them, but they were there. *Why should I need to see them!* I thought. *They're there regardless.*

Exactly, the angel thought.

Here, the angel thought, *now.*

A young man and a girl strolled along the path, coming toward us from the other direction. They were not touching, but kept gravitating closer together as they walked, and then veering slightly apart, as though both of them were alarmed by the mysterious force field of attraction between their two bodies.

The mosquito, or perhaps one of her sisters, droned by once again and, like an audible spark, sizzled out in the dark. To my astral senses, this clearly signified the electrical force drawing them together.

This is the most important moment of your life, the angel said. *Here, now.*

Suddenly, in some magical way, I could see them as clearly as if it were broad daylight. It was as if a shooting star streaked across the sky and exploded, and the blaze had spread out into infinity; and yet at the same time, it was still dark.

The girl was lovely, small and quite slender — with a sensitive but witty expression; large, bright eyes; and lips that seemed to naturally press

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tenderly together in the middle and droop just a bit at the corners like a slightly overripe flower, giving her an air of melancholy. And yet from time to time — without reason, it seemed — she would lift the edges of her lips a trifle, and open wider the bright, heavy-lidded eyes in just the hint of a smile, in rhythm perhaps with the cries of insects, the odors of the flowers, the pulsing light of the moon. Yes, it was all part of the dance.

But here is the weird thing. The boy was me. A few years older, and different, but me.

Exactly, the angel said.

Early twenties maybe, and now, examining the boy more closely, I could discern a subtle difference in the way he/I carried himself. A less defensive, less rigid quality about the way he moved and stood. A more expansive way of gesturing, a certain freedom I did not now possess, and, in fact, could not picture myself ever acquiring. An elegance, even — me!

Now he put his hand out and touched her shoulder. She turned toward him. Her mouth opened wide and moved as if she wanted to speak but couldn't. His other hand was drawn into the mysterious dark sea of her hair.

"Oh no, we can't," she said in a throaty, low tone of voice. The mechanistic cries of insects increased.

"Oh yes, we can," he said. "And we will. No matter what, we will. Because . . . because this is it. This is the only thing that counts. This is it. Here. Now."

They kissed, and though I was only a wraith, a shadow among the shadows, I could feel my heart pounding faster and harder back in the hotel room on the bed.

"We just can't," she said when she could.

"Listen," he said, "believe me, trust me, just let go. Love is the only thing. To hell with college, to hell with everything; just let go, forever."

Her eyes grew wide. "Forever?" she said. "We don't even. . . ."

"Forever," he said. "Till death and beyond. We can both do it, but it has to be here, now. Believe me. Nothing else matters."

She took hold of his head, and once again her eyes widened as she stared astonished into his eyes.

"Yes," she said. "Forever."

Their forms pressed together; and at the same moment, the angel must have spun me around, because now I was facing away from them, and the

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effect of unnatural brightness had seeped away so that it was darkness that I peered into. I could just begin to make out the form of some kind of bench in the deepest shadows beneath a tree — was someone sitting on it? As I strained to see, suddenly the cries of the insects intensified into the cries and howls and clanks and honking horns of the city, and without any sense of movement or change, I was lying back on my bed. Beside my dad's gun.

When I could manage it, I got up and went over and looked out the window again. It didn't look as bad, and at the same time, it looked worse. But I could get out of it. I knew that now. It was a trap, but I could get out of it.

And somehow I could become that boy I had seen. That totally confident young man who believed in love and was not afraid to speak of it.

No, it was more than a belief. It was an enlightenment: love was the true substance that formed that eternal field of force from which bloomed the flower of reality, always now, and I didn't need the angel to tell me that. It was the answer to my question. The right answer to the same question that suicide was the wrong answer to.

I went back over and sat down on the bed, picked up the gun, and levered out the bullets.

I remembered having a conversation back when I was in high school, maybe two years ago, with Donald Hemet. Donald's dad was a collector of guns, and I had asked Donald about my dad's rifle. "Are you kidding?" he had told me. "Savage 99s are a dime a dozen."

Even though I hadn't seen Donald since school, I still had his telephone number in our old address book. So I locked up my room, trudged downstairs to the phone in the lobby, chased the Mary Lou Evans girl off it, and rang up Donald's dad.

"You sure it's a 1914 Model 99?" he said. "I like those. With the .250/300 Savage cartridge they made them for, you can knock just about anything on its ass. They stopped making the cartridges, but hell, I can make my own. Why don't you bring 'er over and let me have a look at 'er?"

So instead of shooting myself with it, I sold it to Mr. Hemet and used some of the money to buy a ticket on a train, heading south. Anywhere south.

I got off a train in Birmingham, Alabama, and, after spending a couple of days looking for work, I was forced to take a job in a limestone quarry.

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It was hard work. And my memories of it are nightmarish — shadowy figures moving like gnomes in a wide, open pit through a smoky cloud of dust. The channeling machine clanking and grinding across the floor of the gray pit like an enormous grotesque insect, all to the musical score of the agonized squealing of chains and pulleys as massive blocks of earth rose surrealistically into the air: this scene somehow fixed in time, so that it seemed like quitting time was always just as far from you as it was when last you asked about it.

I clearly remember sitting in the shade at the edge of the pit somewhere on the downside of a ten-hour shift, smoking a cigarette, sitting near a big, solemn-faced black man we all used to call Big Henry. Big Henry never talked much, and I didn't say anything to him. We just smoked and sighed, and sighed and smoked. But he must have seen the depth of the despair in my expression, because he did a strange thing. Suddenly he just broke out laughing, and I remember clearly that it was a rich, low-toned laugh, a beautiful laugh, somehow free of pain.

"Don't life be funny," he said. "You a white man, and you sittin' here, lookin' 'bout ready to cry. Whoo-ee, de white man gots de blues. But long after you be gone and got some soft job somewhere else, I still be sittin' here, maybe smokin' a cig — maybe this same one, even. Whoo-ee — hey, everybody, white man gots de blues."

And all the blacks stopped in their work and broke out in laughter or shouted something like, "Poor white mans be so down he don't know which way up," or, "Gets to the back of the streetcar, white boy."

And for the first time, the savage truth of the situation dawned on me: they were here to stay; I wasn't.

Nights I walked the streets of that city, looking for her. But of course some nights I fell in with some of the boys, and as the scourge we call Prohibition hadn't quite hit yet, I often found myself having a few beers with someone I'd just met but couldn't remember where. There were a lot of hard, dedicated drinkers in those days, but not so many and not so dedicated as during Prohibition.

One night, blowing my paycheck on drinks for a few of my friends, whose names I did not know, a sullen, quiet fellow sitting next to me said: "What did you say your moniker was, friend?" And when I told him, he seemed amazed. "Why, thet was my old father's name," he said. "And he was a fine man — a fine, fine man he was." He looked ready to cry.

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"What's your name, pardner?" I said.

"Billy," he answered me, eyes wide — expecting — hoping.

"Why, that's my father's name, too," I said. Then shouted: "Another drink for my old friend Billy and me, here."

I had lied, of course, but it seemed to make Billy happy. Ecstatic, in fact.

"You know what?" he said. "You got yourself a good friend here. A good friend who knows what good friends are for. And a good friend who's got hisself plenty of other good friends, you know what I mean?" He nudged me conspiratorily and leaned closer.

"You shouldn't be workin' in no limestone quarry," he said. "That ain't no white man's job. That's a nigger job. Know what I mean?"

"Man's gotta work," I said.

"Listen, I got me some friends in the union. High up there at the top. Know what I mean? And I got me a job in a machine shop. White man's job, foreman. Good union hours, good union pay. Understand? I'm gonna write you down a address right here and now." He fumbled around in his pocket and came up with a crumpled-up scrap of paper, and got a pencil off someone, and scribbled down the address of a machine shop in a stark but clear handwriting.

"You may think that I am drunk," he said, very carefully enunciating each syllable as if it were a separate word, "but I am def-i-nate-ly not. What I am is a friend of yours. Tell you just what you do. You don't go to that nigger's job come tomorrow, you know why?"

I shook my head. "No, Billy, why?"

"Because you don't have to, thet's why. Because don't no friend of mine has to. You show up thet address I give you, first thing tomorrow morning, you got yourself a job."

"But I'm not in the union, Billy."

"You show up at thet address tomorrow, you gonna have yourself a job and you gonna be in the union, my friend. You gonna find out thet old Billy's as good as his word."

NEXT MORNING I woke up with a bad hangover and almost didn't remember the conversation at all. But I found the scrap of paper in my pocket with the address. By now I figured Billy had forgotten all about it. Still, when I started to go to the quarry, my feet just wouldn't take me. What the hell, I thought, it's

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worth a try. Anything's worth a try.

And to my astonishment, Billy hadn't forgotten, and as he said, he was as good as his word.

I started work as an apprentice machinist that very day, at union wages and union hours, only eight hours a day, only six days a week. God bless you, Billy.

"Billy," I said, and I could feel my face getting red, "there's something I've just got to tell you."

"Oh hell," he said, before I could confess, "I don't care what your daddy's name was. It's just that a man's got to help out whoever he can whenever he can; otherwise what the hell is the point? You just go on and forget it. Do a good job for me, thet's all."

Well, I did a good job, but I never forgot it. One year later, and I moved up to machinist, third grade.

But still, it was no picnic working eight hours a day burring the sharp edges off the freshly machined parts we made for the big stock and valve company across town who supplied half the country with water valves. One of the first things I noticed was how many of the sour-looking men working in that shop were missing thumbs or fingers, maybe even an arm here or there.

I figured eight hours a day in that stuffy room, breathing in the metal dust and dazed by the constant screaming of saws and drill presses, you eventually reached a place where you just said, "What the hell," and sawed off part of yourself.

But I was particularly careful and alert. I knew I wasn't stuck there like the rest of them. I knew something about my own destiny.

Since we had to work Saturdays, I usually spent Sunday checking out the countryside. If I could wrangle the loan of a car, that is. And nights, of course, I still searched for her in the streets, but the fact was that already the vision was fading (not the essence of it, the secret heart, the meaning, but just the details), and I wasn't sure if I'd even recognize her anymore.

A pretty young girl who worked in Jack's Café, where a few of us single guys went for dinner after work each night, began flirting with me. Just little things at first, but they all got to me.

After a grueling day's work locked up in the shop with all those screaming machines, the easygoing, friendly atmosphere of Jack's Café was like heaven. The scent of the simple but delicious food that Jack

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himself was always busy cooking, drifting out of the kitchen to us along with the bits and pieces of nonsensical happy hit radio tunes, was a blessed tranquilizer. So that when I first noticed just how pretty Betsy was under all that makeup, I was quite susceptible. And Betsy, well, she just looked right in my eyes and smiled, as if to say: "You noticed." I liked that.

And of course I was a lonely young man.

Betsy didn't look anything like the girl in the garden, and didn't act anything like the girl in the garden. Betsy was blonde, and that girl was a brunette. There was nothing about Betsy that was melancholy. And yet. . . .

The more time passed, and the more I thought about it, the more the vision seemed to have been a metaphor rather than a reality. Oh, it had been real at the time. More real than anything else in my life. But wasn't that just to drive home the meaning so that I would never forget it? Truth was, I just didn't know.

I got promoted to machinist one and started dating Betsy. By the time I made assistant foreman, right under Billy, we were married; and before I knew it, I was the father of Johnny, the first of my two sons.

Not long after Johnny was born, a strange thing happened. One day, without knowing why, I took off work at lunch, and withdrew Betsy's and my savings from the bank (Betsy had put aside a nice little nest egg by the time we'd married). I hid it all between our mattresses. Just like that. As Betsy pointed out, it was a crazy thing to do, and I don't know why I did it, but I just did — and it's a good thing I did, too, because the very next week was when the stock market crashed, the big one that sent all those poor financial experts on Wall Street jumping out their windows; and sure enough, it wasn't all that long before that bank went bust.

I knew we were in for tough times, but I also knew that Betsy and I and little Johnny were going to be all right if we just gritted our teeth, hung on to our money, and rode it out.

The shop fired a lot of people over the next few years, but I wasn't one of them. A couple of times there, it looked like we were going to have to close down for sure, but just at the last moment, we always came up with something. Cutting custom parts for some bigger company that specialized and made all the real money.

During this time, Billy had been promoted, and sure enough, he'd dragged me right along with him. Then finally he'd moved on to a high-

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paying job working for the union, but not without first making sure I got his job. Another favor I wasn't likely to forget.

And now I was starting to realize that while it was getting too late for me to metamorphose into the young man I'd seen in my vision, nonetheless my personality had shifted a great deal in that direction: I was now a whole lot more confident in my speech and demeanor, more relaxed; I smiled more often; people liked me.

Of late the boss had been working less and less, and I was taking over more of his responsibilities.

My promotion had been from shop foreman to plant supervisor, but really I spent most of my time wheeling and dealing with outside people: owners of other shops, who wanted to sell us the nuts and bolts we used to make the parts we now sold to the bigger plants that put together whatever gizmos it was at the time. Or maybe I went out to dinner with some guy who owned a factory and didn't have the slightest idea what he wanted from us, but just wanted to keep the door open in case something came up. I made a lot of contacts. I even made a few friends.

I came more and more to the belief that the vision I'd had was working for me as a living metaphor outside of time, rather than a prediction of actual things to come. It was, if I can say so without being too corny, my guiding light. I resolved not to ever mention anything about it to anyone. To keep it inside. Through it I had moved from a suicidal youth with no prospects, living in the slums of Chicago, to a father and husband who was doing well in all aspects of his life. Birmingham, Alabama, was still a far cry from that lovely garden; I still had a ways to go. But the one thing I always had to be thankful for was that I knew, if not exactly where I was going, at least the general direction.

One day — it was awhile after we'd started pulling ourselves out of the Depression, and things were picking up pretty much everywhere — I had a look at the money Betsy and I had hung on to through the lean years. (It was out from the mattress by now, of course, and back in the bank, picking up interest slowly but surely.) It wasn't a whole lot, but it seemed like enough to do something with. And now seemed like the time to do it. All this economic surging, mixed in with all those valuable contacts I had been making in my new role at the shop, suggested to me that our time was now.

So we moved to Columbia, South Carolina, where I opened up a little

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shop of my own. In case you don't know it, Columbia is a beautiful town with broad, tree-laced avenues, surrounded by sun-dappled southern forest. Just about everywhere you look, there is a cool blue lake sizzling like the first flash of a dream.

For a while we were into hard times again. We hadn't had all that much money to start with, and we'd had to borrow pretty heavily. Mostly my shop was making screws and nuts and bolts, and struggling to get up enough contracts to keep going. This wasn't easy in those days, as there were a couple of giant plants down in Birmingham that got most of the contracts from everyone east of the Mississippi — or at least it seemed that way to me — but we hung in there. I could just feel something in the air, about to happen.

By now we had two sons, and still didn't own our own home. But World War II broke out; and now suddenly everyone needed screws, nuts, and bolts; and I was expanding, hiring, buying more machines as fast as I could, but not near fast enough to keep up with all the contracts I was getting. Although I hate to say it, we were getting rich off the war, fast.

My shop spread out until it covered the whole city block it was on, and suddenly, there we were, living in a beautiful home on the outskirts of town.

Of course I started in right away on a garden. Betsy and I put in a trellis pretty much like the one I remembered, and planted clematis and honeysuckle. I couldn't remember much about which flowers had been there, blooming in that vision garden, partly because it had been night and I hadn't seen them very clearly, partly because, growing up in Montana and later on in downtown Chicago, I hadn't known how to identify what I had seen, and partly because by now the vision had faded to a few pastel sketches in my memory.

But while the vision faded, the garden I was working on grew clearer and brighter. I keep saying it was my garden and I was working on it, and that's wrong: Betsy was right in there, working twice as hard as I, and it was really Betsy who had the gift. Of course, vision or not, it was *our* garden. And it was the delight of our life.

But meanwhile, all was not going so well between me and my sons. Since I had prospered to such a degree from improving my confidence and social skills, I felt it imperative that my boys go to college. I wanted them to make important contacts with intelligent, well-educated people, have

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witty conversations, learn about the world, go beyond me, as far beyond me as I had gone beyond my own father. And it was clear to me that college was the way to do that. Perhaps it was too clear to me. I was very strict with them. I demanded a lot out of them. I didn't allow them to waste a lot of time throwing balls through hoops, or take them on fishing trips. Study came first, with me; and then, study came second.

I believe that they respected me for this, they knew why I was doing it, but there just wasn't a whole lot of open, spontaneous affection between us.

Still, life was good. Both my boys went to college, graduated, went beyond me.

My son John, who was a doctor, had a son, and one year later my other boy, Billy, who was an English lit teacher up at the university up at Chapel Hill, North Carolina, had another son. Both boys, like me, had married fine women.

I think Betsy was kind of disappointed that there were no girls in the family; she sometimes remarked that it was strange that my father, who had been an only child, had me, who had two sons, both of whom produced only sons. She always said this in a slightly angry tone of voice, as though we men were conspiring to separate and surround the women, instead of it being an act of fate, or God, or whatever. But mostly, I think, she was happy with the way things were going.

Time floated by. I retired from my job. Betsy and I grew old. Our garden grew.

Since both the boys had moved away, and Betsy and I were happiest working in our garden together and did not like to travel much, we saw less and less of them. We hardly knew our grandchildren. I knew Mike only as the well-behaved little blond boy who always said "sir" and "please" at the Thanksgiving dinner table, and Nick as the dark-haired, dark-eyed one who was always into mischief and never said "sir" to anyone. Somehow, with the way time just kept on drifting by as subtle as the movement of a few floating wisps of clouds, I never even noticed that I was not close to either of my sons, I was not close to my grandsons, and — yes, I have to admit it now — I was not even really close to Betsy. The only thing I really was close to, now that I think of it, was that damn garden. But I didn't know it. It had all just slipped away from me, little by little, all the time, like smoke dissipating from a fire into the night air. Forever gone.

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Around this time I began to notice that I was now not just growing old, but starting to die. I did not want to notice it, but I couldn't help it. The power of my heart to drive my blood through my veins was fading. I could feel it in there, working harder, but getting less done. Somehow I was embarrassed by this more than I was afraid. I'd lived a long time, done what I could; now I was fading out. Why make a fuss over that?

When I had my first heart attack, and was lying there in that hospital bed, dazed and oh so, so weary, surrounded by all those people hustling and fussing around me with their busy thoughts crackling like electricity, I just felt embarrassed and ashamed and tired.

I remember clearly, looking into my son John's eyes and thinking, *Who the hell's that? Why won't he leave me alone!* It must have been then that I realized what I had done. What we all had done. I remember looking from face to face, and realizing for the first time that they were strangers. All of them. I knew only things about them: I did not know who they were. Even Betsy. I did not know who anybody was except myself. It was only then that I realized that I'd failed the vision, after all. It had been about love.

And even now, time fell by like drops of rain. On and on. I recovered. Everyone raved about how well I was doing. I walked slow, moved slow, and now it seemed to me that everyone else was darting around me like flies, thinking too fast, talking too fast. I was always confused, dazzled, and tired. But tired as I was, I did not sleep well at all.

I tried to change things, of course, right at first. I tried to talk more to Betsy, to the kids, to my grandsons. But I couldn't think what to say, and mostly I couldn't understand what they were saying back to me. So finally I just gave up. I was just too tired now.

I had stopped working on the garden. But I still liked to sit out there and watch Betsy work. It was now, since I had slowed down so much, that I could see for the first time how different this garden was from the one in my vision. Gardens are living creatures, and they refuse to mimic your ideas of what they should be. The older they get, the more character they develop. And actually, when it came right down to it, this was Betsy's garden anyway, a lot more than it was mine. Still, the best thing in my life nowadays was to sit and watch her work in it. She was so serious. Her touch was so tender and nurturing. It made me feel good to know that she'd be out here working hard after I was gone, coaxing a little extra out of the shrubbery, flirting with the flowers.

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That spring we got an invitation to go up to Chapel Hill for what was to be a sort of family reunion. It was set for Memorial Day weekend, which meant my son Billy, as well as both my grandsons, now both college age themselves, would be free for a few days. Of course no one really thought I could or would make the trip, and it was intended only as sort of a token invitation.

But I surprised everyone by accepting. What the hell difference did it make if I died here or died in Chapel Hill? I figured.

And when Betsy mumbled about my health, I just told her I felt fine, which had become the standard lie I used to describe myself all the time now, regardless of anything.

The fact was that the trip to Chapel Hill from Columbia wasn't much of anything. Sitting in an airplane for a little bit, up to Raleigh, followed by sitting in a car. But somehow it almost killed me, like I was something Betsy had planted in that garden that could grow only there, and lost sustenance the farther it was taken away from its home.

Everything about the reunion bothered me. There were too many people talking too fast. I kept calling everybody by the wrong name. I couldn't seem to concentrate on whatever was happening, so that I always said the wrong thing at the wrong time.

And of course it had been my intention to make one last attempt to right things, and maybe I was trying too hard. Maybe I was just too old.

My sons seemed to be doing well enough, as always. Getting along with their wives, satisfied with their work. My son John, the doctor, fussed over my health and perpetually checked to see if I was taking my medicine; while my son Billy, the teacher, gave me a sample lecture every once in a while on most any subject that came up, just to sort of remind me what he did at the university.

My grandsons seemed older, but still basically the same. John's son Mike, the well-behaved little boy, had grown into a well-behaved young man, and was majoring in architecture at the Georgia Institute of Technology, which he pointed out to me, had more black engineering majors than any other college. I thought of poor Big Henry and all the poor blacks stuck back there in that awful lime pit in my memory. Forever. Mike still said "sir" and "please," and smiled and listened to what you said. He had even brought his fiancée up to meet everyone; they were planning to wait to get married until they both finished graduate school. She seemed like

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a nice enough sort, though quiet and dreamy-eyed. Probably thinking about what to name the 2.3 children they were going to have.

Nick was the same as he always had been. A slender, dark-haired, and most mischievous little boy, grown into a slender, dark-haired, and most mischievous young man. He played the wrong music too loud. Was always late for supper. Always injecting the wrong note into the conversation, quite deliberately. Flirting with Mike's fiancée (who ignored him with casual disdain). And even prodding me just a little bit here and there. ("Least you can do is leave poor old Gramps alone, can't you?") He was supposed to have started college last year (and the year before that) (and the year before that), but had not. And spent most of his time, I heard, racing around on his motorcycle and thinking about writing his great novel.

Finally it was to be our last night here, though not for the reason we supposed: Betsy and I thought we would be heading back home in the morning.

It was one of those huge family dinners, turkey and pumpkin pie for some reason, though God knows it was about as far from Thanksgiving as you could get. My son Billy, the teacher, had given me another one of his fine lectures on the subject of why it was Thanksgiving tonight in the heart of spring, and had convinced me, as usual, long before he had finished with the subject.

"That's all right, Dad," John had got in — somewhat sheepishly, it seemed to me — "We're thankful just to have both you and Mom together with us."

"You, too, Lori," Nick tossed in, Lori being Mike's fiancée. "Thanks, Mike."

Lori frowned and disdainfully shook her head, as if to say, "Children!"

After dinner, groggy from my one glass of wine, stuffed with turkey, and dizzy with the insane acceleration of action that this being the last night of the reunion brought on, I felt a flush spreading over my face, as if someone had suddenly turned up the heat in the room.

Too much had gone on for me to even dream of keeping track. Lori had fought with Nick. Then for some reason this had led to Lori fighting with her fiancée, Mike. This had led somehow to my son John, the doctor, quarreling with my son Billy's wife, Elizabeth. Billy, still the teacher no matter what, had of course stayed clear out of the argument, and merely

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shrugged and rolled his eyes at me and Betsy. From time to time, he would cut in with something like, "I'm sure we're just not communicating what we really feel here," or, "We're getting into a no-win situation here."

Good God, I don't know what all else happened, but suddenly I was flushed and hot; I had to get out of there. I wandered out onto the back porch; they had a lovely back porch, and a nice little garden, a lot smaller than ours . . . still—

But I still felt so hot. All those rich spring garden odors seemed cloying, making the air heavy and hard to breathe. Even so. . . . I yawned and stretched.

An insect whined across the dark, and unerringly found my cheek. I slapped at it. Too slow. Too late. "Goddamn mosquitoes," I shouted out loud. Suddenly the sound of my own voice did something to me that I can't describe. I almost had hold of something. Something important. But I was too old. And too slow.

I went back inside. Was the argument still going on? I couldn't tell anymore. Everything was just buzzing. My cheeks were burning, and my head. . . . Was I getting the flu?

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Then I understood; I had known it all along, but had been afraid to face it. I could feel my heart, fighting and failing, fighting and failing. And now all I wanted was to be alone.

I muttered some kind of excuse, and shuffled off back outside again. Staggered down the steps, and now, walking bent over with pain, into the garden.

Off to the left was the flat stone bench beneath the scrawny little peach tree, where Betsy and I had loved to sit these past few days. I just barely made it, and crumpled up and lay down on it. Not thinking anything, just feeling my heart fluttering, and struggling to breathe, and now recognizing the dull, steadily growing ache spreading up my arm and into my neck and shoulder. Then I heard the voices.

First the voice of the bird. "Cheer up. Cheer up. Cheer up," the ornery little bastard was saying; then — ecstatically — "We're real. We're real."

Somehow I managed to turn over on the bench so I could see the two figures moving into the garden.

The boy turned and caught the girl by the shoulder and put his hand tenderly into her hair.

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"Oh no, we can't," she said.

And by now, even I recognized it for what it was. Fascinated, and at the same time dying, I watched my vision unfold, exactly as I had experienced it when I was a youth, and now I had the final realization that it was a metaphor and yet it was also reality, both at once. The boy was Nick, and the girl was Mike's fiancée, Lori. It had been plain to see all along that they had been falling in love. I had never realized how much Nick resembled me.

And when the scene was played out, and the boy and girl silent in each other's arms, I seemed to catch sight of a ghost among the bushes, with an angel at its shoulder, looking toward the bench where I lay, striving to see. I would have laughed if I could have laughed.

But apparently I made some noise, and even fell off the bench without even noticing, because the next thing I knew, I was swimming in a sea of pain, and my head was in Nick's lap, and Lori's lovely face was floating up there beside the moon, and even the angel was here again. Or still.

"You told me it was me," I said.

Exactly, the angel thought.

"Grandpa, Grandpa," Nick said, and his voice was trembling with emotion. To my astonishment, he was crying.

"You said it was me," I said out loud again, and then, at last, I understood. I lay with my head in my grandson's lap, dying, and in the next moment I sat there crying and looking down on my grandfather's face, which was in my lap. Then I switched back and forth, faster and faster, until suddenly I was both at once. And I was in the garden. And then I spread out until I was the garden. Every trembling blossom. Every singing bird. And then, just when it seemed I was going to spread out and diffuse into forever, I was suddenly back in the center of that sea of pain, looking up at my grandson's face. At one single tear moving slowly down his cheek. Which slowed. And became all there was or ever would be. And then just now froze.

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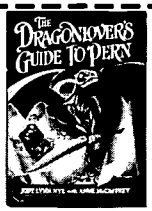

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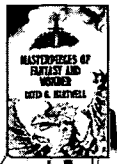

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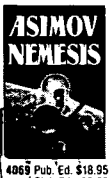

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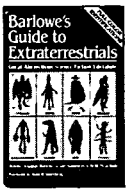

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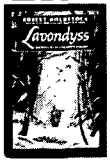

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